

5th July 2026

Genesis 24;

Weddings are very special days, full of significance and memories. Hopefully good ones - but not always.

A minister was a bit nervous about conducting his first wedding and when he came to the point in the service where he asked the congregation if anyone knew of any reason why these two persons should not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, to declare it now – it all came out wrong and he ended up saying

‘If any of you know of any reason why these two persons may not be joyfully joined together in matrimony to declare it now.’

There were some present who thought the new wording was an improvement!

One marriage got off to a bad start during the wedding service. The vicar said ‘you may now kiss the bride’. And she said ‘not now. I’ve got a headache’.

A little girl attended a wedding for the first time and whispered to her mother ‘why is the bride dressed in white? Her mother decided to keep it simple and so replied ‘because white is a happy colour and today is the happiest day of her life’. The girl thought for a moment and then said ‘so why is the groom wearing black?’

At the end of the wedding she asked her mother ‘why did the lady change her mind?’

‘What do you mean?’ asks her mother.

‘Well’ replied the little girl, ‘she went down the aisle with one man and came back with another’

Some people hope for a marriage made in heaven – but for most the relationship is down to earth – or as one wit said, marriages are made in heaven - but then again, so are thunder and lightning.

Marriages in the Bible tend to be fairly earthy, brought about by human needs and impulses and yet also have a heavenly perspective about them.

Today’s passage looks at how Abraham got a wife for his son Isaac. It is full of earthly touches – yet also has faith that God is at work through them all.

Abraham is on his deathbed and starts fretting about his son and what is to become of the promise God gave him that he would be the father of many nations. Isaac isn’t shaping up to the task of keeping the family name going. Abraham gets his servant to go to his homeland in Mesopotamia and gain a wife for his son. He says ‘On no account must Isaac marry one of the local Canaanite girls’.

Did your mother or father say that to you? – ‘on no account must you marry a boy from that estate’. God forbid one of my children marrying a Blackburn Rovers supporter! I remember Sam collecting football stickers and he came home the other day excited and said Dad, guess what – I managed to swap all my Blackburn Rovers players. It’s so easy to pass on your prejudices to your children!

When the servant asks what he should do if he can’t find a biddable Mesopotamian girl who is prepared to leave home, Abraham declares, in verse 7, ‘the Lord who took me from my father’s house and swore to me that he would give this land to my descendants, he will send his angel before you and you will take a wife from there for my son’. Dying, Abraham declares his faith in the promises made to him and in God’s continuing care for his descendants.

Arriving at the city of Nahor in northern Mesopotamia, the servant prays that the Lord will make it clear to him which of the girls who come to draw water at the well is the appointed bride. The test the servant suggests might elsewhere in scripture be described as a sign. It is at the same time a test that is calculated to reveal the characteristics required in a patriarch’s wife. She must be energetic and hospitable.

It was an inspired idea, designed to elicit something of the girl’s character, never mind her appearance. In a hot climate, anyone would offer to draw water for a thirsty stranger, but it would take a very unusual and generous person to draw water for 10 thirsty camels! One camel can easily drink 25 gallons.

I don’t know if you had a short list of qualities you were looking for in a partner? The servant prays that the girl from whom he asks a drink of water will not just give it to him but volunteer to give his ten camels a drink too. He has not finished praying when the beautiful girl appears. He asks for a sip of water and then she enthusiastically waters his ten camels as well. Amazed, he then inquires who her father is and whether he might stay the night. Even more astonishingly, she replies that she is the daughter of Bethuel, who in turn descended from both of Abraham’s brothers. Abraham’s hopes, and the servant’s prayers, have been answered abundantly, above all that they asked or thought.

But to persuade Rebecca’s family of the appropriateness of the match could prove more tricky, and the second part of the story shows Abraham’s servant deploying all his persuasiveness to convince the family that he should take Rebecca to marry Isaac. While Bethuel, Rebecca’s father, might have been expected to be the most important person to win over, it is quickly apparent to the servant that it is her mother and her brother Laban who will have the final say.

When you are dealing with the relatives you always have to sort out who’s the boss. A girl came from a very strict religious background. One day, she came crying to her mother: ‘I can’t marry Julian after all – I’ve discovered that he doesn’t believe in hell!’

‘Don’t worry’ thundered her mother, ‘get married and I’ll convince him of the existence of Hell!’

From his first appearance on stage Rebecca’s brother Laban is shown to be more interested in material advantage than other considerations. So, the servant begins by informing Laban of Abraham’s great wealth and that Isaac is his only heir. Then he mentions that Abraham has insisted that Isaac marry within the family, not a Canaanite – hence the servant’s journey to Mesopotamia.

After appealing to Laban’s pocket and his sense of family solidarity, the servant finally addresses his piety, retelling how he prayed at the well, how Rebecca appeared, and how, though she didn’t know she was doing so, she fully answered his prayer. Laban and Bethuel acknowledge the irresistible force of the servant’s arguments and they say piously ‘since this is from the Lord, we can say nothing for it or against it. Here is Rebecca; take her and go’.

They have thereby consented in principle to the marriage. But it is one thing to agree and another to act. And next day, egged on by his mother, Laban attempts to stall. ‘Let the girl stay with us for a few days or so, and then she can go’. The servant’s insistence on immediate departure is hindered by the family’s insistence that things should be delayed. Different families dealing with each other, is never a smooth process!

Eventually Rebecca is invited to break the deadlock; she is asked, ‘will you go with the man?’ and despite fraternal and maternal opposition, she says, ‘yes, I will go’. In so doing she behaves like Abraham, who also left home and family for the Promised Land.

By the time the caravan reaches Canaan, Abraham has died, for Isaac is now head of the clan. So the servant reports back to him, not to Abraham. Rebecca is given Sarah’s tent to live in, a sign that she is now the chief woman in the community and in due time she marries Isaac. The stage is now set for the next act in the drama of the Patriarchs’ that we’ll look at next week.

This story obviously refers to how marriages were arranged in Bible times. Isaac is unusually passive in the process – you have the impression he was a little sheltered, perhaps being an only child his mother had been a little possessive and not encouraged him to get out more.

The bride’s lack of involvement during her parent’s negotiation of the match was entirely typical. Apparently even today in South India verse 50 ‘this thing comes from the Lord’ is used on wedding invitations where the parents have arranged the marriage.

But there are a lot of similarities with today about how people tie the knot. In some respects not much has changed in 4000 years.

A theme throughout this story, and throughout life, is the hidden mysterious guidance of God. Already the servant of Abraham knows he has been led and he repeats the conviction in verse 48 – ‘I blessed the Lord who had led me by the right road to take my master’s niece for his son’. God has done nothing directly and explicitly. There has been no clear sign or signal. Some would regard this chain of remarkable events in finding the girl at the well as ‘good luck’: the servant is a discerning believer who has found God at work here.

The term ‘led’ (nahah in Hebrew) in verse 48 occurs nowhere else in Genesis. It occurs in other parts of the Old Testament in reference to guidance in the wilderness or help in time of personal stress. Its best known use is Psalm 23 which is a statement of utter confidence in God’s benevolent care:

‘He *leads* me beside still waters, he restores my soul

He *leads* me in paths of righteousness for his names’ sake.

And so, it is claimed that Rebecca is the one appointed for Isaac’s wife. The story reflects the conviction that all events are under God’s care, and God will bring them to a good end. Admittedly God does nothing visible. The story does not have God intervene or intrude but it does offer a world view in which there are no parts of experience which lie beyond the purpose of God.

The principal characters accept this reality as such and interpret it in such a way. This might seem naive – but it may also be seen as a mature reflection on faith. It asks people to read God’s faithfulness in retrospect. We do not always know the gifts of God in advance. But given a perspective of faith, we can in subsequent reflection discern an amazing movement of God in events we had not noticed or which we had assigned to other causes. The servant believer studies the events and draws a conclusion.

The story helps people think about faith, what it is and how it comes. In our present day culture which grasps for visible signs of faith and ‘proofs’ particularly ‘scientific proofs’ or which falls for too many ‘religious forgeries’ this story stands as a foil against easy and mistaken faith. The workings of God are not usually spectacular, magical nor oddities. Disclosure of God comes more often by steady discernment, and by readiness to trust the resilience that is present in everyday life. There is an understatedness about the action in this story. But it is not reticent about faith. It is an understatement that is ready to be sustained and profoundly grateful when gifts are given. The expected response to this story may be a new awareness of the buoyant serenity in which faith lives.

Of course, it is possible that such a reading of reality is a deception, a delusion. But that is the risk of such a perception. The servant and Laban may be mistaken in their acknowledgements, but the story doesn’t consider that. It defines our view of life in

affirmation not in suspicion. The servant prayed at the outset in verses 12-14 'make it occur Lord. Grant that all things will come about of themselves'. The faith of this story is one in which things occur seemingly as they will and yet are credited to God. The story nurtures a mature faith that resists both easy romanticism and hard cynicism. The faith offered here is for those who are willing to be led even when we seem to be walking of our own accord.

Sometimes in life we may be wondering what to do next – where will our needs be met? Pray the prayer of the servant: 'make it occur – grant that these things will happen – and then watch for things to unfold, one way or another. The Psalmist put it like this 'commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him and he will act' (Psalm 37.5).

Perhaps you have made mistakes, taken what you've known to be wrong turnings – but perhaps you have also felt moments where you have been led, when things seemed right – even perhaps in finding the right woman, the right man? Well, like the servant - Bless the Lord!

And always keep an eye on perspective – perhaps there hasn't been a long enough period for the hindsight to reveal the work of God yet.

Let us pause for a moment of reflection on how God may have led us and be leading us.