

GENESIS—WEEK 18

ABRAHAM PASSES THE TORCH



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well by Salomon de Bray (1597–1660)
On display at Musée de la Chartreuse in Douai, France*

Abraham finishes the task of burying Sarah by buying the cave and field that will become a legacy. Then he launches the task of finding a wife for his main physical legacy—Isaac.

This play out wonderfully. Abraham’s servant displays great faith, and God rewards that faith beautifully.

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Thank you.

Genesis 23:17–24:28 — Abraham Passes the Torch
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1 Genesis 23:17–20 (ESV)

So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites.

Abraham was being more than a little coy in describing himself as a sojourner. Though the Hittites don't know it, this is the land the LORD promised him.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ... And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. — Genesis 12:1, 5–7 (ESV)

In the next chapter, Abraham will make it clear he isn't leaving and neither is Isaac. Though he said he was buying the property for the cave to bury Sarah, he bought *the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area*. This is a pretty good-sized chunk of real estate.

And his making such a big show of paying the full price is strategic. He wants to make sure that the whole property is sold *in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city*.

This is title insurance. Abraham is putting down roots.

You can be righteous and clever at the same time. In fact, we're commanded to be exactly that.

"So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." — Matthew 10:16b (ESV)

Abraham is cleverly preventing a future problem—someone disputing his ownership of the field. He's being wise on a number of levels.

Abraham knows that people are fallen. Thus, he anticipates their possible sinful actions and precludes those actions in advance.

But note that Abraham does all this without insulting or offending anyone. His actions are neighborly and ethical, yet shrewd.

This is the perfect model for how Christians should do business.

2 Genesis 24:1–9 (ESV)

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” The servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” Abraham said to him, “See to it that you do not take my son back there. 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. But 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.” So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Abraham is in the land God has given to him and his offspring, and he’s determined that they stay there. But he doesn’t want Isaac to marry one of the locals. So he sends his most senior servant off to fetch a bride from his relatives in Mesopotamia. The servant is required to swear to this task by putting his hand under Abraham’s thigh, which must be some kind of special oath in that culture.

But the servant worries about the woman’s willingness to leave her homeland to marry someone sight-unseen. Abraham makes it clear that keeping Isaac in Canaan is the top priority and the oath is voided if the woman won’t come to Canaan. If that happens, Isaac may marry a local.

The servant’s concerns set up the right perspective for the rest of the chapter. This mission is far from a sure thing. What happens next is an exceedingly improbable sequence of events—though any successful mission is improbable. God’s hand in this will be obvious.

More importantly, Abraham knows that God’s hand will be obvious. He confidently tells the servant that the LORD *will send his angel before you*—but doesn’t say what the angel will do. He also doesn’t lay out a contingency plan for how long the servant should keep trying or how many different women he should try to get to come to Canaan. He just says, “*if **the** woman is not willing to follow you,*” come on home.

Abraham’s confidence here is striking. It almost looks like he has some kind of inside information. Yeah, faith often looks like that.

Faith often is that.

One of the keys to a vibrant church is people following their calling. Rarely do people feel qualified to do what the LORD asks them to do. But if they feel called, they’re ready. Ask God to make His will clear so that each of us will be emboldened to follow our calling.

Clear calling was the foundation of Abraham’s faith.

3 Genesis 24:10–14 (ESV)

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am 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 her 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 makes a surprising prayer request; he asks that a young woman use a particular phrase offering to water his ten camels. The specificity of the quote is surprising enough, but the bit about watering the camels is extreme. A thirsty camel can drink a quarter ton of water in three minutes.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camel>

Offering to draw up water for ten camels is just wild. Is the servant looking for a really stocky wife for Isaac?

No, this is another example of faith in action. The camels may not be all that thirsty—though the girl couldn't know that. The servant is counting on God to point the way; he isn't relying on his own judgment at all.

Abraham has taught him well.

The servant's prayer is a great example of how to discern and follow God's will. Modern Christians would do well to study, even emulate, this servant's prayer.

The problem is that we know what we want, so we ask God to make it happen. We aren't neutral. Thus, we often fail to ask God to show us if what we want is what He wants.

Abraham's servant doesn't want to come home empty-handed. If I was in that situation, I'd pray for something that didn't leave much chance for that.

Yet Abraham's servant does the exact opposite. He sets up a scenario where his mission fails unless God gives a clear sign. The genius of this is that his priority is getting God's will correct. Failure **is** an option. Getting God's will wrong is not.

The servant is well-schooled in the proper practice of faith. He is letting go of his control of the situation and is only seeking the LORD's will. He's handing the keys to God and letting Him drive.

This is a wonderful example of "God-driven" prayer.

4 Genesis 24:15–21 (ESV)

Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, 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. The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." She said, "Drink, my lord." And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. 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. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not.

Wow. Rebekah's words are exactly what he prayed for. Her showing up instantly adds to the sense that God is coming through big time. Her offer to water his camels until they have finished drinking, is especially surprising. We just read in yesterday's lesson that camels can really tank up if given the chance.

So he stares at her in silence.

But the text doesn't just say that. It says that *he gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not*. He's not done yet. Remember, Abraham asked him to *go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac*.

He needs her to be a relative. She is, but he doesn't know that yet. Also, she must be willing to come with him, to marry Isaac sight unseen. That's not a sure thing.

But the scene is electric with the sense of God's involvement. What has happened already feels like a miracle.

The servant is just waiting to see what glorious thing the LORD is going to do next.

What a privilege. The servant is in the middle of an "I was there" moment that he's sure to tell his grandchildren about.

And therein lies a curious lesson. It's important to tell your grandchildren, and others, about your eyewitness experiences. Whether good or bad, you should let others know about significant events. Learning from others, instead of learning everything the hard way, is the very definition of wisdom used in Proverbs.

If miracles were an everyday thing, they wouldn't be miracles. If you're privileged to see God do something special, keeping it to yourself is just wrong.

That's exactly why Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote the gospels.

5 Genesis 24:22–28 (ESV)

When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, “Please tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?” She said to him, “I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.” She added, “We have plenty of both straw and fodder, and room to spend the night.” The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD and said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen.” Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things.

Ten camels is a lot of wealth. Even in modern Israel, a single camel can be the prize possession of a family. Rebekah would be expected to be nice to a traveler displaying such obvious wealth. Still, her offer to draw the water for the camels was pretty bold; that could have turned into a big job. Rebekah showed that she understood this when she said, *“I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.”*

So the servant breaks out some serious gold and gives it to her. Then he asks for an identity check and a room for the night. When her answer is exactly what he’s hoping for, he launches into prayer and worship. In this he reveals that his master is Abraham and that he’s searching for a relative of his. *Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things.*

In the culture of the day, it’s obvious that he’s shopping for a bride. Still, the gold he gives to Rebekah is eye-popping. She reacts as if she’s hit the jackpot and runs home to tell momma.

But she’s not excited about the gold. If that was it, she would have left earlier. No, it’s hearing him thank the LORD and mentioning Abraham that triggers her race home.

The whole scene just tingles with God’s supernatural involvement, and Rebekah is caught up in the excitement.

The problem with experiences like this is that over time, their memory fades. We need to counter that so that we remain mindful of the thrill of knowing God, even if it does only pop up occasionally.

Sure, there’s a cost to being a Christian. Any gospel that fails to warn you about the struggles Christians face is a false gospel.

But knowing God is sometimes a blast, and, frankly, the encouraging times are essential to keeping us from burning out. Thus, we should make a point of savoring those moments.

Abraham’s servant is really enjoying this—as he should. He celebrates with on-the-spot worship and prayer. Think about that the next time you have a “mountaintop experience.”

And notice that the servant’s worship and prayer are rewarded by God. They’re what launch Rebekah.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How can we be “righteously shrewd” in business dealings?
2. Have you ever felt called by God to do something beyond your capabilities?
3. Have you ever asked God for confirmation (or refutation) of a plan?
4. Have you ever witnessed something you thought was supernatural, but that you didn’t want to tell anyone about?
5. What “mountaintop experiences” have you had?