

Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament: A Woman for Isaac

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith
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Readings

Genesis 24:1-4, 10-28 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹ And Abraham was old, advanced in days; and Jehovah blessed Abraham in all things. ² And Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, who administered all that he had,... ³ "I will make you swear by Jehovah the God of the heavens and the God of the earth, that you will not take a woman for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell; ⁴ but you shall go to my land, and to [the place of] my birth, and take a woman for my son, for Isaac."

¹⁰ And the servant took ten camels from his master's camels and went, and all his master's goods were in his hand. And he arose and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹ And he made the camels to kneel down outside the city, near the well of water, near evening time, near the time the women who draw water go out. ¹² And he said, "O Jehovah God of my lord Abraham, please make this happen before me today; and do mercy to my master Abraham. ¹³ Behold, I am standing by a spring of water; and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ And it shall be, the young woman to whom I say, 'Please tip your pitcher, so I may drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also,' that her You have destined for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have done mercy to my master."

¹⁵ And it happened, that he had hardly finished speaking, and behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, the brother of Abraham, with her pitcher on her shoulder. ¹⁶ And the young woman was very good to look at, a virgin, and no man had known her; and she went down to the spring, and filled her pitcher, and came up. ¹⁷ And the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your pitcher."

¹⁸ And she said, "Drink, my master!" and hurried, and brought her pitcher down onto her hand, and gave him a drink. ¹⁹ And she finished giving him a drink, and said, "I will also draw water for your camels, until they have finished drinking." ²⁰ And she hurried, and poured out her pitcher into the watering trough, and ran again to

the well to draw, and drew for all his camels. ²¹ And the man, marveling at her, was silent, to know whether Jehovah had made his way to prosper, or not.

²² And it happened, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a nose jewel of gold, its weight a beka, and two bracelets on her hands, ten [shekels] of gold their weight. ²³ And he said, "Whose daughter are you? Tell me, please, is there a place in your father's house for us to pass the night?"

²⁴ And she said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵ And she said to him, "We have both straw and much fodder, and also a place to pass the night."

²⁶ And the man bent, and bowed himself down to Jehovah. ²⁷ And he said, "Blessed be Jehovah the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His mercy and His truth toward my master. I was on my way, when Jehovah led me to the household of the brothers of my master." ²⁸ And the young woman ran, and told her mother's household about these things.

Arcana Coelestia 3203

The situation with all truth is that at its earliest stage it is merely something known, but as it develops with a person it becomes a matter of life. It is as it is with young children when they learn to walk, to talk, to think, and to use their intelligence and make sensible judgements. Once these activities – through habitual engagement in them – have become unpremeditated and so spontaneous, they disappear from among the facts they possess about how to do those things, because they are now instinctive.

A similar situation also exists... among people whom the Lord is regenerating or causing to be born again. At first they are exactly like young children, in that... the spiritual truths which they possess exist as facts, for when matters of doctrine are learned and introduced into the memory they are nothing other than facts. But then the Lord summons those facts from the memory one after another and implants them in the person's life.... Once this has happened a conversion so to speak takes place, that is to say, the person starts to act from good, and no longer from knowledge as they had done previously. When this happens a state of blessedness begins with them and wisdom begins to exist with them. All these things show what separation from facts within the natural self is. [This is what is] meant by Rebekah's dropping down from upon the camel, which she did before she knew that it was Isaac....

Introduction

- The story we're focusing on today is about finding a wife for Isaac, but the person who really sets the whole story in motion is not Isaac but his father Abraham.
- Abraham had been promised that he would be the father of a great nation and that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed.
 - But, for the longest time, he had no children at all because his wife, Sarah, was barren.
 - And then he had a child by another woman. And he wondered if that son, Ishmael, would be his heir.
- Finally Sarah had a child, Isaac.
- Then Abraham thought that Isaac would have to be sacrificed but they got through all of that and Isaac grew up to adulthood.
- But then Abraham was even older and his son Isaac was not married.
 - If Isaac didn't ever get married then the promise wouldn't come true.
 - If Isaac married the wrong person, then that too could make the whole plan get messed up.
- And so Abraham commissions his oldest and most trusted servant to go find a wife for Isaac.
 - The question of this story is: will he be able to find a suitable woman for Isaac or will it all fail?

Focusing on How this Relates to Jesus

- There are so many different parts of this story that we could focus on.
 - There is so much contained in this story.
 - For today and for this sermon series, we are focusing on discovering Jesus in the Old Testament.
 - We know from the Lord talking with His disciples on the road to Emmaus that all of the Word is about Him at the deepest level.
 - It's worth trying to see how that's true in specific stories from the Old Testament.
 - That's what we're going to try to see.
 - What can we learn about the Lord's inner experience from this story about finding a wife for Isaac?
- Here are a couple of general ideas from the teachings for the New Church about what was going on inside Jesus while He was on earth:

- He had a Divine soul and He had a weak human part that He took on from Mary that He was gradually separating from.
- At the same time, He had a human part that He was gradually making Divine.
 - This process of separating from the weak part from Mary and making the human Divine is called glorifying His human.
 - Part of that process was joining together love and wisdom, goodness and truth at all levels within Himself.
- The process of the Lord glorifying Himself corresponds to our regeneration.
 - They are connected and related but also very different.
 - One of the big differences is that our regeneration is something that the Lord accomplishes for us – we participate but He's the one making it all happen.
 - Whereas the Lord was the one accomplishing His glorification – He was consciously involved in everything that was happening to Him.
- There are different ways of talking about all the details of this.
 - One is to use terms like Divine Celestial, Divine Rational, and Divine Natural and their corresponding truths.
 - Another is to talk about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives.
 - These stories with all their details about the complex interactions between the characters miraculously and perfectly contain what Jesus went through.
 - We will mostly need to wait till we get to heaven to really understand it (*Arcana Coelestia* 3017e), but if we can understand a tiny bit more about the Lord today, that seems worth a try.
- Here's one passage explaining some of these ideas:
 - To make His Human Divine the Lord came into the world in the ordinary way, that is, He chose to be born as any other person is born, to receive instruction as any other does, and to be born again as any other, but with this difference: A person is born again from the Lord, whereas the Lord not only regenerated Himself from Himself, but also glorified Himself, that is, made Himself Divine; also a person is made new through the influx of charity and faith, whereas the Lord was made so through the influx of Divine Love that was within Him and that was His own. From this it may be seen that a person's regeneration is an image of the Lord's glorification. To say it another way, the process of the Lord's glorification can be seen reflected – though it is seen remotely – in the process of human regeneration. (*Arcana Coelestia* 3138)
- Let's give it a try!

Promises to Abraham

- The promises to Abraham about His descendants relate to the promises that were made about Jesus Christ and what He would do.
 - The angel Gabriel said, "He will save His people from their sins."
- In Jesus there was that love and that desire to achieve those things.
 - The central tension was, could that be done?
 - And could it be done at all of the levels of life?
 - It's not enough to just have Abraham and Sarah.
 - It was not enough for Jesus to just be born with a Divine soul.
 - That Divinity needed to be brought from the Abraham level (the inmost), to the Isaac level (which is called the Rational), and then on down to even lower levels.
 - Abraham and Sarah needed to have a child.
 - And that child, Isaac, needed to find a suitable wife.
 - And then they needed to have children.
 - Then those children needed to find suitable wives.
 - And on and on down the generations.
 - This is a picture of the Lord working from the highest level in glorifying His human.
 - In marrying love and wisdom, goodness and truth, at all levels of Himself so that it would be possible for normal human beings to also do the same in a lesser way.
- We're going to cover just a few of the details of this process and of the story in this talk today.
 - If you'd like to learn more, there's a whole chapter about this in *Arcana Coelestia*, 150 pages of fascinating stuff to reflect on.

The Danger of Finding the Wrong Woman

- Now, the problem with finding a suitable wife for Isaac, was that they were living in the midst of the Canaanites.
 - And a daughter of the Canaanites would not be a good wife for Isaac because the Canaanites worshiped other gods – they had other loyalties and priorities than to the Lord and to following Him.

- In Jesus, He had this goodness at the Isaac/Rational level of His mind.
 - And that goodness wanted to be married to a beautiful affection for truth.
 - It wanted to be connected to a longing for truth that would draw enough water to quench the thirst of ten camels.
 - The risk was that Abraham's servant might settle for less.
 - That he might just try to find a daughter of the Canaanites who lived nearby.
 - That would be easier – no travel required.
- The part of Jesus that was from Mary was just as weak and inclined towards selfishness and evil as any of us.
 - There are plenty of selfish reasons to want to learn truths, even truths from the Lord's Word.
 - You can use them to build up a reputation for being a good, religious person.
 - You can use truths from the Lord's Word to influence and manipulate people to get what you want.
 - These were the ideas that would have been around Jesus as He was growing up from the scribes and Pharisees and other religious leaders.
- And so, in the story, Abraham made His servant swear that He would go back to the the place of Abraham's birth to find a wife for Isaac.

An Example at Our Level

- In us, an Abraham level love might be something like the longing for marriage that the Lord gives each of us for "a lawful and lovely partnership with one" (*Conjugal Love* 49).
 - If that love is going to become real it needs to not just be at the level of our soul: it also needs to come down into the level of our day-to-day lives.
 - And so we need knowledge about how to pursue a relationship.
 - And this is where we find ourselves also living in the midst of the Canaanites.
 - There is no shortage of advice and ideas around us about relationships.
 - Advice to guys about how to get the most girls.
 - Ideas about what makes for good relationships where the highest priority is getting what you want.
 - But we should not marry ourselves to these ideas.
 - We need to go back to a different source.

Camels

- It's now time to talk about camels.
- Occasionally we get hints that there is something deeper going on in stories from the Lord's Word.
 - One of the kinds of hints we might notice is odd details that are included – things that don't make sense to mention, unless there's something deeper going on.
- In this story, one of the hints that there's something deeper going on is all the talking about camels.
 - Camels play a big role in the story in that Rebekah generously offering to water all of the camels is the sign from Jehovah that she is the one that is right for Isaac.
 - But there's more to it than that.
 - Camels are mentioned 18 times in this chapter.
 - Genesis tells us that the servant took ten of his master's camels when he left on his journey.
 - When he gets to the well he made his camels kneel down there.
 - Later in the story, in part that we didn't read today, Rebekah's brother, Laban, comes to the well to welcome Abraham's servant to come stay with them and he specifies that he has a place for the camels; and the text specifies that, when they come to the house, he provided straw and food for the camels.
 - Then, when Rebekah agrees to leave with Abraham's servant, it says, "And Rebekah arose, and her young women, and they rode *on the camels*, and went after the man" (Genesis 24:61).
 - Isaac sees them coming and we are told "he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, *there were camels* coming" (63).
 - And finally, we read that "Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and saw Isaac, and dropped down *from the camel*" (64).
- In Jesus, all of these details relate to how He interacted with facts or knowledge in the natural level of His mind (*Arcana Coelestia* 3048).
 - Camels can hold a lot of water and camels are useful for getting people from place to place.
 - This story couldn't have happened without the camels.

- Just like how the goodness represented by Isaac couldn't have been joined together with the affection for truth represented by Rebekah without a lot of knowledge as the vehicle.
 - The knowledge or facts themselves are not the point.
 - Isaac didn't want to marry a camel.
 - But the knowledge does have a crucial role to play.
- What are we talking about?
 - There are lots of water containers in this story – a pitcher of water, a well of water, camels full of water.
 - And all of these containers are like facts or knowledge that can be empty or that can be containers of truth.
 - The point of knowledge is not just knowing something: the point of knowledge is doing something with that knowledge.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 3068
 - A pitcher is a container that holds water, just as factual information is a container that holds truth. Every fact is a vessel for truth, and every truth is a vessel for goodness. A fact devoid of truth is an empty container, as is a truth devoid of goodness; but factual knowledge that holds truth, and truth that holds goodness, is a well-filled container.

Our Example

- Let's go back to our example of a person who wants to be married.
- Let's say that they go back to the source, back to the Word, to learn what the Lord says is important about marriage and how to have a good marriage.
 - That knowledge can play an important role in that person finding someone to marry and having a good marriage.
 - But that knowledge is not the goal in and of itself.
 - That would be the like the person learning lots of things about marriage from the Word and then never doing anything with that knowledge.
- There is a temptation to do that – to just stop at the point of having knowledge.
 - That's represented in the story by the fact that, after the servant spends the night at Laban and Bethuel's house, in the morning he is ready to take Rebekah and go back home, but Rebekah's brother and mother say, "Let the young woman stay with us for a few days, or ten; afterwards you will go" (Genesis 24:55).

- It feels easier to think that we're done when we've figured out how to do something.
- It's easier to just stay in that state and not actually have to do the messy work of trying to live according to what the Lord says.

Jesus in the Temple at Twelve

- In Jesus' life, we see Him at age twelve, pursuing knowledge of the Word at the temple in Jerusalem.
 - And maybe this is a picture of Him going back to the source to find a wife for Isaac.
 - When Mary and Joseph find Him, after three days of looking, He is "sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard were astonished at His understanding and answers" (Luke 2:46, 47).
 - It was good that He went there.
 - It seems that that was an important part of His development.
 - It would have been very comfortable to just stay there.
 - He was learning stuff, asking good questions, impressing people with His knowledge – why would He want to leave?
 - Except that just knowing things and discussing them was not the point.
 - The point was saving people from their sins.
- In the story from Genesis, when Rebekah's mother and brother ask for Rebekah to stay longer, Abraham's servant says, "Do not delay me, since Jehovah has prospered my way" (24:56).
 - They ask Rebekah if she is willing to go and she says, "I will go" (24:57, 58).
 - Then she rides on a camel to where Isaac is and drops down off the camel to meet him.
 - The knowledge has brought them together and then is left behind when it is time for them to be joined together.
- In a similar way, Jesus does not stay in the temple in Jerusalem.
 - He leaves it and goes down with them to Nazareth.
 - And it says, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."
 - You don't call someone wise who just knows a bunch of things.
 - You call them a know-it-all.

- A wise person is someone who knows things and also knows how to use that knowledge in ways that help good things to happen.
- This is what the passage from our lesson is talking about.
 - When the Lord has summoned facts from our memory one after another and implanted them in our life. Then the person starts to act from good,... and wisdom begins to exist with them.
- Think of how Jesus taught later in His life.
 - He was not someone regurgitating facts that He didn't really believe in.
 - He was teaching truths that had become part of who He was and so He spoke with the clarity, conviction, and love.
 - At the end of the sermon on the mount we read, "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." (Matthew 7:28, 29).
- This is what happens when the Divine Rational has been united with truth.
 - This is what happens when Abraham's son has finally found a suitable wife.
- One of the huge differences between what the Lord went through and what we experience is that the Lord was running the whole process that He experienced, whereas we are barely aware of what the Lord is doing for us.
 - His role was like Jehovah in the story, leading Abraham's servant to exactly where he needed to be.
 - Our role in our stories is much more like Abraham's servant.
 - However, Abraham's servant had an important role to play.
 - He needed to do what Abraham made him swear to do.
 - And, to his credit, he prayed to Jehovah for help, he watched carefully what was going on, and then regularly bowed down and gave thanks to Jehovah for what He was doing for his master.
 - We would do well to follow his example.

Conclusion

- At the end of the story we read this: "And Isaac brought her to his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah, and she was to him for a woman, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother" (Genesis 24:67).
- There is something in us that rejoices any time a man and a woman who are well-suited to each other come together in marriage.
- We can be grateful that, in the story, the Lord brought Isaac and Rebekah together.
 - We can be grateful that, in Jesus, He didn't turn to the selfish inclinations He was born with but instead found an affection for the truth that could be united with His goodness and lead to wisdom that He could share with others.
 - And we can be grateful that the Lord did all of these things so that there's a chance for each of us to join goodness and truth within ourselves and also a chance for each of us to have a healthy and loving marriage with another person.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.