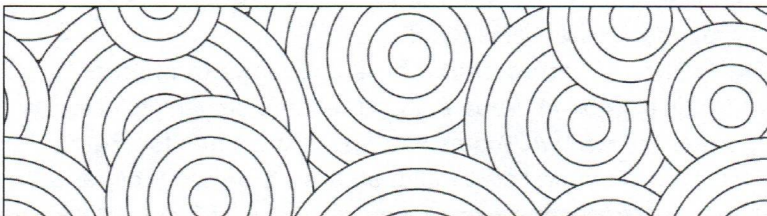


## LESSON 4

# ISAAC AND REBEKAH

GENESIS 24:1-4, 15-18, 56-67



### OPEN IT UP

Isaac's marriage to Rebekah is a classic example of an ancient marriage. Today we figure on dating a few (or many) people over the course of our high school and college years until we settle on someone special. The man and the woman are in total control over how, when, where, and why they wish to date and marry. Isaac lived in a very different world. Abraham sent a trusted servant hundreds of miles away to obtain a woman and bring her back. Isaac and Rebekah had never met, never dated, and never fallen in love. Yet the story of Isaac and Rebekah remains one of the greatest love stories in the Bible. Their love simply grew *after* they were married.

### ABRAHAM'S CHARGE • GENESIS 24:1-4

The chapter opens by informing us that "Abraham was old, well advanced in age" (Genesis 24:1). When one reaches an advanced age, priorities strangely seem to come into focus. One thinks of arranging affairs to take care of family, and that is exactly what we find here. For some reason, Abraham had not yet secured a wife for Isaac, and he appears to have been well beyond an age typical of first-time marriage. In fact, he will marry Rebekah at forty years old

(25:20), about twice as old as we might expect. Some ancient readers theorized that Sarah did not wish to give Isaac up to another woman, but after Sarah's death, Abraham arranged the marriage. This is a deduction based on the order of events in Scripture but otherwise has no support. Whatever the reason, Isaac's wife was an important choice, for it would be through Isaac that Abraham's seed would grow into a vast nation (22:18).

The custom recorded here is strange to modern readers (Genesis 24:2–4). Apparently, Abraham's servant is instructed to swear an oath while grasping his master's genital organs. Such an oath is unparalleled in literature outside the Bible and therefore requires some explanation (see also 47:29). First, Abraham is close to death, or at least he thinks so (24:1). Commands from a master to a servant might not be obeyed after the master's death. So Abraham wishes to bind his servant by solemn oath. Second, the task would be difficult. The trek from Beersheba to Haran was about five hundred miles! Travel time alone would have taken two months or more, not counting the time he would spend in search of a wife. It would be easy to give up.

Third, Abraham is not concerned primarily with Isaac's happiness but with his progeny. The servant understood that male heirs were the endgame of the ancient family, and Abraham had a lot riding on Isaac's offspring. The explicit connection with the purpose of marriage (the production of children) would underscore for the servant how important the mission indeed was.

### **MAKING A CHOICE • GENESIS 24:15–18**

The servant was both wise and intelligent. This much is clear from how he prepares himself to meet the right girl. First, he put himself in position by being in the right place at the right time (Genesis 24:11). Second, doing all he could do, he prayed to God for help (verses 12–14). We find a similar pattern throughout the Bible. Moses led the Israelites to the Red Sea, but God parted the waters. Jesus died on the cross, but God raised Him from the dead. Paul evangelized, but "God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6). We must do all we can and pray for God's assistance, trusting He will act for His glory.

Immediately the servant's strategy works together with God's providence as Rebekah comes to the well (Genesis 24:15). Rebekah had it all. She was "very beautiful" and had never been married (verse 16). The physical attraction must have excited the servant. But external appearance isn't everything. He still needed to confirm that Rebekah was God's chosen, so he asks her for a drink (verses 14, 17). The gesture showed hospitality to strangers, an important feature of ancient family life (18:1–10; Hebrews 13:2). But the gesture also showed a willingness to serve others. A woman must submit to her husband's loving authority (Ephesians 5:22; 1 Peter 3:6). Her simple acts at the well confirmed that Rebekah was God's chosen wife for Isaac.

### **MARRIED • GENESIS 24:56–67**

Marriages in the ancient Near East were business transactions. Daughters were assets that could be "sold," so to speak, in exchange for riches and status. But Rebekah's case was different. While her brother and father negotiated for the goods they might receive in exchange for her, they would likely never reap the social rewards of the marriage (she would live too far away). So they put the decision to Rebekah herself, an unusual tactic considering a woman's status at the time (Genesis 24:58). Agreeing to go to a land she had never been to so she could marry a man she had never met, Rebekah set out for Abraham's home with the servant, a nurse, and her maids (verse 61). The nurse was intended to care for future children, thus underscoring the expectation of offspring.

Scripture tells us that Isaac just so happened to be "in the field in the evening" (Genesis 24:63). Therefore, he could lift his eyes to see "the camels were coming" (verse 63). The scene reminds us of the forgiving father who saw his lost son returning home (Luke 15:20). There can be no doubt that Isaac anticipated the servant's return. What happens next is unexpected. "Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel" (Genesis 24:64).

Rebekah dismounted not only out of respect for her new husband, but also to prepare herself physically. "So she took a veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:65). It is instructive that women who aimed to impress in biblical culture covered themselves. It seems

quite the opposite today. Isaac happily received his new wife and took “her into his mother Sarah’s tent” to consummate the relationship (verse 67). The gesture is likely symbolic, representing to the family that Rebekah has now taken on the role of matriarch.

**WRAP IT UP**

**A**lthough marriage customs in the Bible seem strange to modern readers, it is instructive that marriage was always a formal process whereby the public and the family would recognize a change in status of both the man and the woman. In today's world, it has become increasingly common for people to live together before marriage, enjoying all of the benefits of marriage with none of the godly blessings. God designed marriage from the beginning to be between a male and a female (Genesis 2:24) and for sexual privileges to be reserved for marriage (Hebrews 13:4). Isaac and Rebekah may have met in a manner quite different from couples today, but men and women today can still meet the same standard of godly marriage as they did.



**THINK ON IT**

1. For decades, the divorce rate in the United States has hovered around 50 percent. In Isaac's world, it was virtually unheard of. Explain how, in your opinion, cultures with arranged marriages generally have little to no divorce and in "free" societies the divorce rate is high.

2. Why did Abraham require his servant to swear his oath in such a strange way?

3. How does Abraham's servant express faith in God? How does Abraham's servant do all he can do in order to accomplish the will of God? How can we follow his example?

4. How did Rebekah qualify herself as the proper candidate for Isaac's wife? How should women today behave toward men, balancing biblical commandments with modern social sensibilities?

5. In your judgment, what can the church today do to exalt biblical standards of marriage? How can we help our society with the plague of divorce?