

## AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE

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Genesis 24 selected

Recently, my daughter turned 24 years old. She is of, as we would say, of marrying age. Right now, she's just dating but I expect at some point in the future (and not anytime too soon I hope), that she will call home and say that she's met a special guy and they're going to get married.

In our culture, we leave the courtship and dating and choice of spouse to the couple who are getting married. I will let my daughter make her own decision. But that is not the practice everywhere. In some cultures, in the past, and still today, the custom of arranged marriages is practiced. As a father with a daughter, an arranged marriage has something of an appeal to me.

An arranged marriage is one in which someone other than the couple getting married makes the selection of the persons to be wed. I want to be clear, I am not talking about a forced marriage, no. Those are widely condemned. I'm talking about when a third party, usually parents or another family member, makes the choice for who their child is going to marry. Sometimes the parents will conspire with other parents to pair up their children. Royal families are especially prone to do this.

There are definitely some drawbacks to this custom. The principal one being that the ones being married have little to no say so in the matter. Sometimes, a marriage is arranged for financial reasons and not compatibility.

There are a few significant advantages of arranged marriages. As a father, I can think of several. The greatest is that my wife and I have far more experience in relationships and are far better equipped than our daughter to choose a spouse. We are less likely to be driven by emotion and "love" and are more likely to consider and weigh issues of compatibility. We would also look at the other parents to determine if these are folk that we would want to spend time with. Marriage is far too important to be left to love. A parent can bring their wisdom, experience, maturity, and a level head to making this decision.

Having said that, I would never (wink wink) intervene in my child's choice of a husband, but lots of people do around the world.

As I read up on arranged marriages, I discovered another benefit of these unions that I had not considered before. And that would be low expectations. When we enter a marriage with our dream man or dream woman, we are going to be disappointed at some point. No one will match up to the image we've built in our heads.

But when two young people are united in an arranged marriage, they haven't dated and they likely don't know each other and so their expectations about the other are going to be low. The assumption that we find in arranged marriages is that the parties will grow to love each other in time.

Our reading for today is from the book of Genesis. We've been following stories in this book now for several weeks. As you will recall, God called to Abraham and his wife Sarah and sent them to go to another land and there God promised to give the couple descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. As we discussed several times, the flaw in this plan is that Abraham and Sarah were elderly and they had never had children of their own. So, God was going to need to get to work if Abraham and Sarah were expected to have any descendants.

The couple heeded God's call and left their home and traveled south into the land of Canaan and settled there. In time, Sarah did become pregnant and gave birth to a son that they named Isaac.

By now, Abraham has grown old. His wife Sarah has died and his son Isaac is forty years old and needs a wife. As the parent, it is Abraham's responsibility to find his son a spouse. But Abraham is far along in years and likely doesn't have the energy to undertake this task. So, he delegates this duty to his servant—a man who is never named. Abraham makes this servant swear that he will find a wife for Isaac. But that wife, under no circumstances, is to be a Canaanite—the people who live in the land where Abraham resides. The servant is to return to the land of Abraham's people and there find a wife for Isaac. Furthermore, Isaac, himself, is not to return that land, but is to remain in Canaan because this is the land that God gave them.

The servant sets off for the land of Abraham's ancestors. He does not go empty handed. He takes ten camels and all manner of special gifts including gold jewelry.

When he arrives at the city of Abraham's ancestors, he locates the well outside of the city gates and parks his camels there.

Having arrived at his destination, the servant is not quite sure what to do. How does he find a suitable young woman here? Does he run an ad on Facebook? Does he nail posters to utility poles? Of course not. Instead, he prays. He prays these words: *O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, "Please offer 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.*

And then, before he has even finished his prayer, a young woman named Rebekah walks up. She is kin to Abraham. She is carrying a water jar on her shoulder. As she gathers water from the spring, the servant of Abraham runs to her and asks for just a sip of water from her jar. She let him drink and then offers to water the camels. This was no small feat. A camel can drink gallons of water, and there were ten of them. But Rebekah filled the trough until the camels had their fill.

The servant watched in amazement and then offered her gold jewelry and asked whose family she was part of. She told him and then invited him to her father's home to spend the night.

At the home, the servant explains why he is there and how God had led him to find Rebekah. There is a lot of discussion but in the end her father offers his daughter to return to Isaac. He was no doubt swayed by all the gold and camels and the gifts the servant offered his family. Nonetheless, they do give Rebekah the choice of whether or not she wants to go. She agrees and she and Abraham's men set out to return to Canaan.

As they approach Isaac's home, he is out walking in his field when he sees the camels on the horizon. At the same time, Rebekah spots Isaac and asks the servant who that man is. He tells her. The servant provides Isaac a report of his trip. Isaac then takes Rebekah into the tent where his mother had lived. They are married, and we are told that Isaac loved his wife. In addition, having Rebekah proved to be a comfort to Isaac after losing his mother.

After examining the stories of the horrors inflicted upon Ishmael and Isaac by their father Abraham, this story is indeed a balm to the soul. It is a beautiful love story—or at least the beginning of a love story.

It is also a reminder that God should be in our relationships. God should be in our marriages, our friendships, our business relationships, and even (especially) our church relationships. And the only way to bring God into these relationships is through prayer. In this rather convoluted story of Abraham sending his servant to the town of his ancestors to find a wife for his son, there are too many places for the story to go off the rails. We can feel the tension the servant feels with his responsibility. But the story doesn't go off the rails. God's hand is plain to see. God is guiding each person to be where they need to be. Abraham told his servant that God would send an angel ahead of him to help him in this task. We don't meet this angel, but it is clear the angel is there.

The result of the story is that Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife and she becomes the matriarch of this clan. They will have children—two sons, Jacob and Esau. Esau will become the progenitor of the people known as the Edomites. Jacob will change

his name to Israel and have thirteen children. God's promise of a nation of descendants will come to fruition.

In this story, we see that our God is not above the ordinary life events of each of us.

“This is a story about traveling and hospitality, about meeting strangers who become family, and about taking risks and leaving home in order to find a home. It is a story that testifies to the power of love that comforts and heals grief. Most of all, is a story of faith journeys with paths that providentially cross. The servant's witness emboldens us to move into the future, confident that God's angel leads us on our way.”

Finally, while I may be a pretty good matchmaker for my daughter, God would be far better. I promise to leave this matter in God's hands. We all should seek to include God in all our relationships. We should pray to God to guide us in all that we do.