

Genesis 24

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[0 : 00] So, let's turn to Genesis chapter 24 and spend a little time giving thought to this chapter.

And as I already indicated at the start of the service, on this occasion our focus isn't going to be in such an exclusive way on Rebecca herself, but on a theme that is prominent throughout the incident, throughout the chapter.

And it comes out in different ways, sometimes very explicitly and sometimes more implicitly. And that theme or that truth is the kindness and faithfulness of God.

And I suppose if from the whole chapter I were to identify a verse or a couple of verses that could serve as our text, around which we will give some thought, then I guess we could home in on the words of Abraham's servant as they're recorded in chapters, or rather in verse 26 and 27.

So, basically at this point, the servant is expressing his gratitude for God for leading him to Rebecca.

[1 : 21] And this is how he expresses himself. Then the man bowed down and worshipped the Lord, saying, Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master.

As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives. But very especially, how he identifies God as the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master.

These two attributes of God, his kindness and his faithfulness, are perhaps the most prominent throughout the Old Testament.

The God of the Bible, the God who enters into a binding covenant relationship with his people, is a God of kindness and faithfulness. Now, the two Hebrew words that appear in the verse that we've read, and indeed repeat themselves in different occasions throughout the account.

The two Hebrew words are words that perhaps on other occasions you've heard me refer to very specifically, they are so significant. The words *chesed* and the word *emet*.

[2 : 44] Some of you will remember Jesse, our youth worker, a few years ago, and his son, one of his sons was called *emet*. It was from this word, the Hebrew word, translated faithfulness or truth.

Chesed and *emet*. Now, these two words are variously translated, especially the first one is translated a number of ways. Indeed, in the two psalms that we've sung where I highlighted that this word figured, different words were used to translate it.

I think on the first psalm that we sung, it was covenant loyalty. In the second psalm that we sung, it had been translated with the word love. Sometimes it's translated with the word grace.

Generally, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, so you'll be familiar with, you know, we sometimes make reference to the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was available at the time of Jesus.

Quite often, that word *chesed* would be translated by the Greek word *charis* or grace. So it's a word that is rich in meaning, and the very fact that it is so rich leads it to be translated in a number of connected ways.

[3 : 52] Kindness, covenant loyalty, covenant love, grace, those are the kind of words that are used to try and capture the sense of this word. And then the word *emet*, usually it's translated as faithfulness, sometimes as truth, depending on the context in which it is found.

Now, as we explore the ubiquitous presence of kindness and faithfulness in this whole episode, we'll do so by examining each of the characters in turn and see how they relate to this theme of God's kindness and faithfulness.

So first of all, we'll think a little bit about the God of kindness and faithfulness as he reveals himself, as he acts in this episode. But then we'll move on and think about the servant who trusts in the

kindness and faithfulness of God.

The servant is really the character who occupies most of the writer's attention throughout the chapter. But then we'll move on to Rebecca, and we want to describe Rebecca as the bride who reflects the kindness and faithfulness of God.

And then finally, we want to think just briefly about Rebecca's family. And as we think about the family, we'll think especially about the family blessing that is pronounced upon Rebecca, the family blessing that points forward to the kindness and faithfulness of God.

[5 : 23] And there we'll need to do a little bit of searching to see how that blessing does indeed point in that direction. So let's think of the kindness and faithfulness of God from these different angles.

First of all, the God of kindness and faithfulness. Now, when we read this chapter, you could read it simply as this beautiful love story of a young man who is in need of a wife.

He needs a companion. He needs somebody to share his life with and build a family with. And his father is concerned for the welfare of his son, and that love for his son leads him to instruct his servant to go and find a suitable wife.

And of course, all of that is true. And we can read it at that level, and it's an entirely legitimate level at which to read the account. But of course, behind this family drama, this family love story, there is so much more at play.

The very covenant promises of God are at play. You'll recall, of course, that Abraham, the father who sends the servant, is the one to whom God directed this foundational promise concerning his seed or his descendants.

[6 : 34] At the call of Abraham in chapter 12, we read the Lord had said to Abraham, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you. And then you have this promise directed to Abraham.

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

But foundational or critical to the fulfilling of this promise was that Abraham should have a seed, that he should have descendants. And of course, Isaac is the son through whom these promises will be fulfilled.

But Isaac has no wife. He has no children of his own. And so once again, the very drama that Abraham and Sarah had lived is now being lived out in the person of Isaac. Years are passing, and he has no wife, no suitable wife.

And so how will this promise be fulfilled if there are no children for Isaac? So finding a wife for Isaac is more than just an adventure of love.

[7 : 36] It's also a means to secure the fulfilling of the promises of God. But as we see the way in which God operates in this episode, in this account, we see his gracious and faithful ordering of providence.

The very provision of a wife from Abraham's household. Abraham's concern was that he was living among Canaanites. And he was very much of a mind that he had to live there because that was the promised land.

That was the land that he'd been given. In some ways, it wasn't somewhere where he would have chosen to live given the neighbors that he had. Pagan Canaanites. But one thing he was very sure of is that nobody from among the Canaanites would be suitable as a wife for his son.

And so he needs to secure a suitable wife. And for that, it's necessary to send the servant to his own family in Mesopotamia, some distance away.

But it's interesting that even in the chapters that precede chapter 24 and chapter 22, you have in the account this seemingly unexpected and unusual intrusion in the account of Abraham and Abraham's life.

[8 : 58] You have this little account of Nahor's sons. So Nahor was Abraham's brother. And so in the middle of all that we're being told about Abraham, who is the prominent character, here, suddenly the biblical account tells us about Nahor, way far away in Mesopotamia.

And if you were reading through Genesis, you might say, well, what's the point of this? Why are we being told about this brother who remained in Mesopotamia and who seemingly is of little importance in the grand scheme of things?

Well, the reason that we're told about him is because in that account, we are introduced for the first time to Rebecca, who a couple of chapters later would figure prominently as we have discovered. So God is ordering providence. He's ordering circumstances, even the birth of Rebecca, that Abraham and his family would have known nothing about. Though they were of the same family, distance would have meant that Abraham would have been oblivious to developments in his household and in his family in Mesopotamia.

But God was ordering things. He was ensuring that there would be the birth of this woman, Rebecca, who would be suitable as a wife for Isaac.

[10:10] And then, of course, the account itself. Perhaps most significant or most striking in terms of God ordering providence to secure the outcome that God has determined is that very, at a human level, unlikely encounter at the well.

So here you have the servant. He's traveled hundreds of miles, a long and exhausting journey. And he arrives at this well. And at the evening hour, and all the women are coming to draw water. And of all the women who could have appeared at just the moment, it had to be Rebecca. And you can see God's hand ordering even the travel plans and the moment of their arrival and the moment of Rebecca's departure from her house to go to the well, that all would be coordinated to such an extent that at the precise moment that the servant arrived, Rebecca would arrive to provide water, as we have read.

So you see God's kindness and faithfulness in operation in ordering events. Even the manner in which Rebecca and her family are willing to go along with the proposal that is made by this stranger.

Of course, he does identify himself. And when he identifies himself, of course, they know who Abraham is. He is the uncle that they hadn't seen for decades, but they'd heard about him.

[11:35] So in that sense, he's not a complete stranger. But nonetheless, he appears out of the blue. And he is proposing that in a seemingly very unexpected way that this woman, Rebecca, should go with him to be the wife of Isaac.

And yet there is a willingness on the part of the family for this to happen. Remember that the family member who figures most prominently here is Laban, not the father, who was still alive because he's mentioned in the account.

But we can only presume that he was perhaps very aged, perhaps incapacitated, because it's clear that Laban is the one who is operating as the head of the family, the head of the clan.

Now, we meet Laban again, and he's a very unsavory character. And yet here, on this occasion, when it is necessary for him to be in agreement with what is being proposed, he shows complete agreement and a willingness to facilitate his sister being taken by this servant to be the wife of Isaac.

So in all of these ways, you see the God of kindness, of covenant loyalty, the God of covenant love and faithfulness, ordering events for the fulfilling of his covenant purposes.

[12:55] You see also the way in which God demonstrates his kindness and his faithful provision in providing for his people. So you have Abraham. This was Abraham's great concern that a suitable wife be found for Isaac, and that is, of course, the outcome.

You can imagine the joy that that would have produced in Abraham when his servant returned. And indeed, not just his servant, but of course, they met Isaac on the way. So when Isaac returns with his wife or the woman who is to be his wife, you can only imagine the joy that that would have produced in the heart of Abraham.

Of course, the joy of the servant in being able to fulfill his mission, the joy of Isaac when he sets his eyes on Rebekah for the first time. And indeed, the joy of Rebekah when she discovers that this man who, in many ways, was a stranger to her was a husband who would love her, as we have that indicated at the very close of the account.

So we have in this account a demonstration in real life of God operating on the basis of kindness and faithfulness. But let's move on to the servant.

I want to think of the servant as the one who trusts in the kindness and faithfulness of God. The servant is not named. It seems likely reasonable to identify him as Eliezer of Damascus.

[14:19] And the reason for that is it seems very reasonable that Abraham would have entrusted this task to his most trusted servant. And on a previous occasion, Eliezer is identified as such.

In chapter 15 and in verse 2 we read, So this was clearly a servant who enjoyed the complete confidence of Abraham to the extent that Abraham considered him almost like a son.

And just as an aside, it is a credit to Eliezer of Damascus that when at one point it appeared that he was going to be the one who would inherit all of Abraham's wealth, and circumstances overtook that with the birth of Isaac, yet he remains loyal and faithful to his master.

So this is a servant, it would seem, who was entrusted with this task. And notice some of the features of his mission. Well, one thing that's very prominent is the servant's loyalty to Abraham. And it shines through the account, this loyalty to Abraham, this concern to do his master's bidding, to be faithful to Abraham. And of course that loyalty reflects the faithfulness of God.

[15:43] This is a man who in his own dealings reflects something of the faithfulness of the God to whom he turns and the God in whom he trusts. But of course, perhaps most significantly, this man is characterized by trust in the God of Abraham.

And his trust is a reflection of his master's now mature faith. Abraham's faith had not always been mature. But in this episode, the faith of Abraham comes across as being very mature.

The confidence that when his servant goes, he will find a wife for Isaac. And the servant reflects something of that mature faith.

We read of him praying, seeking God's direction. In verse 12 and following, we read, Then he prayed, Lord God of my master Abraham, make me successful today and show kindness.

Once again, the same word reappears. And show kindness to my master Abraham. This prayer of the servant, interestingly, intriguingly, is the first extended prayer recorded in the Bible.

[16:49] Now, we are just in Genesis, so we're going to have a lot of firsts in Genesis. But it is, at least of anecdotal interest, that here this servant is the one who is recorded for the first time praying in this very personal way to God.

Speaking to God about something very practical and seeking God's help and blessing. The prayer is marked by personal trust, but also a bold confidence.

There's a kind of vocabulary or literary curiosity in the language that he employs. There in verse 12, we read, Then he prayed, Lord God of my master Abraham, make me successful today.

That's the manner in which the Hebrew expression is translated. Make me successful today. But interesting, the actual literal translation of that would be, Lord, make it happen. That's quite striking, isn't it?

You have this servant, and he's praying to God. He's been given this task, and he says, God, just make it happen. Make it happen. I want to fulfill this mission, but I can't do it by myself.

[17:52] Make it happen. That's a great prayer to pray. You know, if we're sure that something is of the Lord, and we're seeking something for God's glory and for the advance of his kingdom, why not pray in that way?

Lord, make it happen. That's what this man does. Lord, make it happen. And he not only prays asking for God's help, but when God grants him help and Rebecca is provided, well, we read also, and we've read the chapter of how he prays in thanksgiving when God answers.

He thanks God for his kindness and faithfulness extended to his master. But this trust in God is also, and we just mentioned this in the passing, it's also accompanied by wise action.

You know, the servant doesn't say, well, all I need to do is pray and then just wait for God to deliver. He does pray. He prays, God, make it happen. But then he does what he has to do, and he's very wise and, what would we say, almost astute in ensuring that the bride that he is to select is suitable for Isaac.

You know, the very test that he sets, that this would be a woman who would be willing to act in the way she did, so generously and so, with so much kindness towards a stranger.

[19:16] It was a very high bar that he set, and yet this was the way in which he would be assured that she was indeed suitable. In other ways, he is, what would we say, astute in securing his objectives.

In some ways that we might think are less than noble. For example, he is very keen to emphasize to the family of Rebekah how wealthy his master is.

Not only how wealthy Abraham is, but he explicitly says, and Isaac will inherit all of it. And there's a sense of which, well, this is going to convince them. And it does seem that Laban was very impressed by the wealth of the servant and of Abraham, his own brother.

He presumably would have known almost nothing of how Abraham's fortunes had accumulated over the decades. So here is a servant who trusts in the kindness and faithfulness of God.

Let's move on to the bride, move on to Rebekah. In Rebekah, we find a bride who reflects the kindness and faithfulness of God. In what we read of her, that is what stands out.

[20 : 29] We're told of her physical beauty, and that is remarked on, and rightly so. But particularly what is highlighted in the account is her kindness and her faithfulness.

You see, in providing for this stranger, not only the water that he asked for, but in offering to provide water for his ten camels, we're told in the account that he traveled with ten camels.

They had traveled for many days, probably about three weeks, and we don't know all the ins and outs of it. We don't know to what extent they'd been able to drink water en route at different points. But we can be pretty sure that the camels would have required large quantities of water to satisfy their thirst after such a journey. And yet here is this woman meeting this stranger for the first time, and yet she is willing to provide all of this water, all of the work and the exhaustion that would come with it.

And so what do we see in her? We see this remarkable kindness, kindness that was above and beyond the call of duty. And of course when we think of such kindness, we then reflect and say, well, what does that, or who does that remind us of?

[21 : 44] Well, it reminds us of a God who is kind above and beyond the call of duty. And so this woman reflects in her own character something of the kindness of God, but also the faithfulness of God.

Now for us to reflect the faithfulness of God, there are, I suppose, two aspects. There is the exercising trust in his faithfulness, but also being faithful ourselves in our relationships with others. And Rebecca demonstrates both of these aspects of faithfulness. She trusts in a God that she presumably knew very little about, and she also demonstrates a loyalty to this unseen husband whose references she has to take on trust from this servant whom she has only met for the very first time.

And what does she do? Well, like her uncle or her great uncle Abraham, her father-in-law-to-be, she is willing to leave family and friends and the comfort of a place that was known to her, to leave it all behind and launch into what for her was the unknown, showing the kind of faithfulness that Abraham himself had shown when he was first sent to the promised land.

And as I say, she does all this probably on the basis of very little knowledge of the God of Abraham. But then finally, we want to just focus on the family blessing that's recorded in verse 60 and that points forward to the kindness and faithfulness of God.

[23 : 23] Notice there in verse 60, So basically the point of the story is, or the point that we've arrived to at the story at this juncture is that it's all agreed that Rebecca's going to go.

The family are sad. They wanted her to stay for a bit longer. Entirely understandable. But the servant is insistent that they need to go. Rebecca agrees to go. And then we read, Now we read this blessing, and we could maybe read it, and maybe we have many times and not give it a second thought.

It's Rebecca's family wishing her the best in rather grandiose language, and maybe even very tribal language. You know, may your descendants possess the cities of their enemies.

But notice how this blessing, pronounced by Laban and by Rebecca's family, notice how it has striking similarities with a blessing that was pronounced upon Abraham by God or by the angel of the Lord.

In chapter 22 and verses 15 to 18, we read, This is following Abraham being tested when he was willing to take Isaac to be sacrificed.

[24 : 41] And of course then Isaac was delivered. And then at the conclusion of that account, we read in verse 15, The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand in the seashore, your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.

Notice the almost exact correspondence in language. And through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me. Now that's the angel of the Lord.

That's God himself blessing Abraham. You say, well that's to be expected that he would use that kind of language. But how striking it is that Rebecca's family, who had very little knowledge of the God of Abraham, of Yahweh, yet they, in their blessing, no doubt unknown to them, are using very similar language, pointing towards this offspring of their sister, Rebecca, and of what would be the destiny of the offspring of their sister, Rebecca.

And when we see how close these two blessings are in terms of content, it allows us to identify the offspring that Rebecca's family speak of.

As I say, unbeknown to them, I would imagine when they speak of, may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies. Who is this offspring that they are speaking of?

[26 : 09] Well, the same offspring that the angel of the Lord, that the Lord was speaking of when he spoke to Abraham. It's Messiah Jesus. He is the offspring of whom the blessing speaks or that the blessing points to.

And as I say, I would imagine that Laban and Bethuel and the other family members had not the slightest notion that that was what they were saying. But God knew what it meant beyond what they imagined that it meant.

The fulfillment of this blessing directed to Rebecca by her family, the fulfillment of this blessing in Jesus is seen most beautifully and most strikingly in the language employed by John at the start of his gospel.

And with this, we kind of draw things to a close. In John chapter 1 and in verse 15, we see how John describes the offspring of Abraham who has come in the person of Jesus through whom the nations of the world would be blessed.

So in John chapter 1 and in verse 15, notice the language that John employs. In John 1 verse 15, he says this. Verse 14 rather, The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

[27 : 30] We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father. Then notice particularly what John says, full of grace and truth.

And these are the very words, the Greek equivalent words, but the very words that replicate the kindness and faithfulness of God that all of our account has been stressing. And so here you have this family with only a very sketchy knowledge of the God of Abraham.

And yet they bless their sister Rebecca and they bless her in language that points forward to the coming of Messiah Jesus who when He comes is described as full of kindness and faithfulness, full of grace and truth, full of covenant loyalty and faithfulness.

And so that this characteristic, this most prominent truth concerning God it finds its most dramatic expression in the person and in the coming of Jesus, the promised seed of Abraham.

Indeed, the promised seed of Rebecca that in itself is very dignifying in a culture where women would have occupied a very secondary place in the structures of society.

[28 : 51] Yet here we have this blessing directed to Rebecca. And yes, we can say that Jesus is the seed of Abraham and He is, but He's also the seed of Rebecca. He's also the fulfillment of the blessing that Rebecca's family pronounced upon her, that from her seed there would come one who would possess the cities of her or of his enemies.

Now, let's just think a little bit about that. How does that fulfill in Jesus, this taking possession of the cities of his enemies? Well, perhaps in Laban's mind he imagined military victories and by the sword winning all these battles.

Of course, in the Gospel age we participate in the fulfilling of that promise and of that prophecy by sharing with others the Gospel.

That is how victories are won. That is how enemies are brought into the family of God as we share with others the good news concerning Jesus. Not by sword, not by might, but by God's Spirit.

The God of Abraham, a God full of kindness, and faithfulness. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

[30 : 05] We thank you that you are indeed the God who is full of grace and truth. We thank you for the most eloquent demonstration of your grace and truth in the person of your Son, Jesus, in the giving of your Son, Jesus, the one who is himself full of grace and truth, full of kindness and faithfulness.

Heavenly Father, we pray that we would be ever trusting in you as such a God, that we would be like Abraham's servant, seeking your direction and your help, but as we do, trusting that you will deliver because you are a God of kindness and faithfulness.

But we pray also that in our own relationships we would reflect something of the kindness and faithfulness to God as we relate to those around us. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.