

## Explore the Bible Adult Leader Commentary

### Session 13

#### God Provides

#### Genesis 24:1-17

**Context:** Genesis 24:1–25:19

**Memory Verse:** Genesis 24:27a

**Main Idea:** God provides for the needs of His people in a way that is consistent with His eternal plan.

#### FIRST THOUGHTS

Have you ever stopped to ask someone for directions? In the days before navigational assistance, when you were lost, you either drove around or asked for help. Sometimes that assistance was great. The person you asked for help knew where you needed to go and gave you clear and simple directions. But there might have been other times when you asked directions only to listen to a confusing, rambling discussion about ways that might possibly get you to where you needed to go. Your confidence in the directions depended on your confidence in the person giving those directions.

*(In PSG, p. 133) Describe a time when you stopped to get what turned out to be poor directions, or used a faulty navigational device. What frustrations did you experience?*

God gave Abraham directions about his future and the future of his family. But there were still details left to work through—such as finding a wife for Isaac. Abraham and the servant he entrusted to find Isaac’s wife turned to God for directions. They had followed God’s directions in the past, and now they sought His guidance for the future. We can trust God to lead us down the right paths.

#### UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

##### Genesis 24:1–25:19

God promised to make a great nation from Abraham’s countless descendants (see Gen. 12:2; 15:5). Now that promise appeared tenuous at best. Isaac, Abraham and Sarah’s only son and heir to the promise, was in his late thirties. Fulfillment of the promise required a new generation, but Isaac was not married. Nor were his prospects for a wife particularly hopeful. Abraham opposed any union with the women of Canaan. Their promiscuous participation in the fertility cult of Baal was abhorrent to God. However, Abraham also resisted Isaac traveling elsewhere to find a suitable bride.

Abraham commissioned a servant, possibly Eliezer (see 15:2), to go back to Haran and obtain a wife from Abraham’s extended family (24:1-9). While the servant paused at a well in Haran, he prayed for success (24:10-14). God granted the servant’s petition and led him to Rebekah, Abraham’s brother’s granddaughter (24:15-21). The servant lavished her with gold jewelry. When her brother Laban saw the expensive ornaments, he invited the servant to dine with the family (24:22-32).

Before accepting the invitation, the servant shared in great detail his mission, his prayer, and his perception of Rebekah’s advent. Rebekah’s father and brother listened to his story then consented to betrothing her to Isaac. A dispute arose the next morning concerning the servant’s departure time. He wished to return to Abraham that same day, but Rebekah’s family wanted him to postpone leaving for 10 days. When Rebekah consented to go immediately, the servant, Rebekah, and her maidens left straightaway. Rebekah and Isaac were married upon their arrival back in Canaan (24:33-67).

Abraham remarried after Sarah’s death. His second wife was named Keturah, and she gave birth to six sons. However, these children were not granted a portion of Abraham’s inheritance. Like his first son, Ishmael, they were sent away before Abraham’s death. Isaac would remain the sole heir (25:1-6). It should be noted here that the issue of inheritance pertained to salvation history more than material wealth. In God’s plan, salvation would come through Isaac’s descendants. But God’s salvation would include the descendants of Hagar and Keturah (see Isa. 60:6-7; Acts 2:11).

Abraham died at the age of 175. Isaac and Ishmael buried him alongside Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. After Abraham’s death, Isaac received God’s unique blessing. Ishmael had 12 sons. These sons became the founders of 12 clans that roamed the region between today’s Suez Canal and the northwestern area of the Arabian Peninsula (25:7-19). Today, the Arabs in the Middle East trace their ancestry back to Ishmael.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### THE ASSIGNMENT (Gen. 24:1-9)

<sup>1</sup> Abraham was now old, getting on in years, and the LORD had blessed him in everything. <sup>2</sup> Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who managed all he owned, “Place your hand under my thigh, <sup>3</sup> and I will have you swear by the LORD, God of heaven and God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I live, <sup>4</sup> but will go to my land and my family to take a wife for my son Isaac.” <sup>5</sup> The servant said to him, “Suppose the woman is unwilling to follow me to this land? Should I have your son go back to the land you came from?” <sup>6</sup> Abraham answered him, “Make sure that you don’t take my son back there. <sup>7</sup> The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from my native land, who spoke to me and swore to me, ‘I will give this land to your offspring’—He will send His angel before you, and you can take a wife for my son from there. <sup>8</sup> If the woman is unwilling to follow you, then you are free from this oath to me, but don’t let my son go back there.” <sup>9</sup> So the servant placed his hand under his master Abraham’s thigh and swore an oath to him concerning this matter.

Abraham sent a trusted servant to his homeland in search of a wife for Isaac. He reminded the servant that God would direct him to the right person. If the servant was unable to find a suitable candidate, he would be released from this assignment.

### VERSE 1

Abraham’s life had been long and prosperous. Despite occasional lapses of confidence, his life had been characterized by genuine faith. *The LORD*, not Abraham’s ability, was responsible for his accomplishments. The Hebrew word rendered *blessed* means “to endure with power for success.” It denotes an action of God’s grace. It is something He does apart from human activity. However, Abraham’s son remained unmarried and childless. Abraham determined to acquire a wife for Isaac in order to perpetuate the divine blessing for the future.

*What is the significance of the notation that God had blessed Abraham in everything? What concerns might Abraham have harbored about the kind of person his son would marry?*

### VERSES 2-4

Abraham was selective in choosing an individual to whom he would entrust the mission of finding a wife for his son. Complete confidence and trust must be given to the man selected. Abraham gave the task to his senior servant. Although the Bible does not give his name, he may have been Eliezer, Abraham’s heir before Isaac’s birth (see Gen. 15:2). Regardless of identity, this man managed the daily affairs of Abraham’s household. He had proven himself to be capable of carrying out whatever assignment that was given to him.

Placing one’s *hand under the thigh* was a sign of an especially solemn oath. Both biblical occurrences of this practice involved men nearing their death (see also 47:29-30). The thigh represented the procreative power of an individual. Hence, the rite pointed to the continuation of the family line. It took on special urgency here, conveying to the servant that his mission would determine the future of Abraham’s family. However, the oath Abraham elicited did not focus on himself. It focused on *the LORD, God of heaven and God of earth*. This identification echoes the very first line of the Bible and attributed the life of future generations to the creative power of the Lord rather than to the procreative activity of men and women.

Under the oath the servant took, every indigenous Canaanite woman was eliminated as a potential bride for Isaac. Abraham had lived among the Canaanites for over 60 years. He was keenly aware of their moral deficiencies. The fertility cult of Baal was the primary Canaanite religion. Every aspect of this heathen cult was anathema to the one true God. Its basic theology taught a multitude of deities. Its principle sacrament focused on ritual sexual intercourse with cultic prostitutes. Moses warned later generations of the danger for apostasy that union with this cult presented (Deut. 7:3-4). Paul commanded believers not to marry unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). This threat was no less real in an earlier period. Therefore Abraham insisted that the servant return to Haran and find a suitable wife from his relatives who had remained in that city.

### VERSE 5

The servant recognized the seriousness of his task and its formidable nature. Its success hung not only on his own endeavor but also on the inclination of the chosen woman to move to Canaan. He would be asking her to leave her family and move to a distant land in order to marry a man she had never seen. She would be asked to make this choice solely by the words and conduct of this servant. That she might refuse his entreaty was not an unrealistic possibility. What should he do if she declined his proposition?

## VERSES 6-8

Abraham took three actions. First, he prohibited the servant from taking Isaac to Haran. God promised to give Canaan to Abraham's descendants. Abraham's son was heir to that promise. From God's perspective, Canaan not only was Isaac's home, it remained integral to His call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:7). Going to Haran would be tantamount to repudiating the word God previously had spoken. Abraham would not risk the possibility that his son might be lured into remaining in Haran.

Second, Abraham clarified his certainty about the servant's success. Since continuation of God's promise was contingent on the servant's success, God would *send His angel before* the servant. The Hebrew word for angel means "messenger" or "representative." These supernatural beings performed a variety of tasks for God. Many scholars think here the terminology refers to the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord denoted some manifestation of God Himself. In either case Abraham asserted that God would prepare the way for the servant to succeed. Success was guaranteed.

Third, if the woman did refuse to come with him, the servant would be released from his oath. Since Abraham's preceding guarantee precluded this possibility, this final action relieved the servant of any responsibility for failure. The only way he could fail was if Abraham was completely wrong, in which case responsibility for failure rested solely with Abraham for commanding the servant to do something that violated God's plans.

## VERSE 9

The servant's inquiry is a reminder to us to gather as much information as possible before starting a task. Abraham's response suggests we should evaluate proposed tasks according to God's Word. We must never violate God's unmistakable directives. Likewise, we must understand that our role is to obey God's instructions. Success is God's responsibility. Therefore we are to assume our mission without hesitation and with complete confidence that God will achieve His goals through our efforts.

After Abraham resolved the servant's apprehensions about his mission, the servant *swore* the *oath* that Abraham requested. He would comply with Abraham's instructions. More importantly, he embraced the mission. He committed himself totally to the task of acquiring a wife for Isaac.

If the servant was Eliezer of Damascus, his devotion exemplified that which Jesus requires of His followers. Isaac's birth robbed Eliezer of a significant inheritance. A vengeful person might have used this assignment as an opportunity for payback. Jesus said, "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). In following Christ, our beliefs and ambitions must be replaced by Christ's values and goals. What God desires always has priority over what we want.

## THE PRAYER (Gen. 24:10-14)

*<sup>10</sup> The servant took 10 of his master's camels and departed with all kinds of his master's goods in hand. Then he set out for Nahor's town Aram-naharaim. <sup>11</sup> He made the camels kneel beside a well of water outside the town at evening. This was the time when the women went out to draw water. <sup>12</sup> "LORD, God of my master Abraham," he prayed, "give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. <sup>13</sup> I am standing here at the spring where the daughters of the men of the town are coming out to draw water. <sup>14</sup> Let the girl to whom I say, 'Please lower your water jug so that I may drink,' and who responds, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels also'—let her be the one You have appointed for Your servant Isaac. By this I will know that You have shown kindness to my master."*

The servant followed Abraham's directions and trusted God. When he arrived in the town of Nahor, he prayed for God's help.

## VERSES 10-11

The servant assembled a caravan of 10 camels loaded with various items from Abraham's material possessions. In addition to material possessions to be used in acquiring a bride, the camels would have carried provisions to sustain the caravan on its long journey.

The servant traveled to the town where Nahor, Abraham's brother lived. *Aram-naharaim* means "Aram of the two rivers." This designated the geographical region of the upper bend of the Euphrates River in northwest Mesopotamia. The Hebrew construction of *Nahor's town* can mean either the town where Nahor lived or a town named Nahor. A town near Haran by that name appears in several ancient texts from Abraham's time. A town named Nahor—the name of Abraham's grandfather and brother—suggests it was populated by Abraham's relatives. The length of time required for the journey is not specified, but it would have taken several weeks at best. No doubt, as he traveled, he contemplated how he would discover the right woman. Often as we begin a task, it is necessary to start without having all the answers. Instead, based on what we do know, we prepare accordingly and then simply begin.

Late in the day the caravan arrived at a well just outside of Nahor. After traveling all day in the arid climate, the animals and their drivers would have been extremely thirsty. In the cool of the evening, women from town would come to draw water for their families.

Because of its menial nature, this task frequently was assigned to young daughters, many of whom would have been of marriageable age.

*(In PSG, p. 137) What are some of the difficulties the servant would have encountered on such a journey? What does God's provision in this story teach us about His sovereignty?*

#### **VERSES 12-14**

Abraham's servant was not content to acquire any young woman as a wife for his master's son. He sought the Lord's guidance so that he might select God's choice. The fact that the servant *prayed* demonstrates that he knew the Lord was in control. He had accepted Abraham's assurance that the Lord would precede him and give *success*. The issue now was how that result was to be achieved.

In the Hebrew text, the plea for God to *show kindness* is far more profound than its English translation. The Hebrew terminology refers to covenant love and grounds the servant's request in God's covenant with Abraham. In other words, he simply asked God to be God and to behave according to His covenant with Abraham.

Specifically, the servant asked the Lord to identify a future wife for Isaac by the words that she spoke to him. The second occurrence of the term *kindness* implies that if a girl spoke as the servant requested, God had chosen this woman. She would be the one God appointed. This designation elevated the choice beyond an appropriate woman to the precise individual whom God determined would be Isaac's wife. Isaac was more than merely Abraham's son. The designation of Isaac as God's *servant* acknowledged transferal of the covenant and its inherent promises to the next generation. Selection of the correct wife pointed to its transfer to a third generation.

The servant's request for such a detailed sign signified his absolute submission to the will of God. He knew precisely what God wanted. Now he must know who God wanted. The exact words specified would reveal a sovereign God was working in her life to achieve His purposes. As we undertake tasks, we must depend on the Lord to give His guidance at the right time. Often we can allow circumstances to inform prayers, but we need to be open and honest. We must avoid attempts at coercion. Most of all we must desire whatever God wants.

*(In PSG, p. 138) How would you characterize the prayer of the servant? What lessons concerning prayer can be learned from the servant?*

#### **THE ANSWER (Gen. 24:15-17)**

*<sup>15</sup> Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah—daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor—coming with a jug on her shoulder. <sup>16</sup> Now the girl was very beautiful, a young woman who had not known a man intimately. She went down to the spring, filled her jug, and came up. <sup>17</sup> Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me have a little water from your jug."*

God answered the servant's prayer with the arrival of Rebekah at the well.

#### **VERSES 15-16**

God answered the servant's prayer immediately. Even before he finished praying, the appointed young lady arrived at the well. Her qualifications are listed in these two verses. First, she was descended from Abraham's brother Nahor and thus met the biological and ethnic criterion specified by Abraham. Second, she is described as *very beautiful*. While this was not mentioned as a requirement by Abraham or in the servant's prayer, it might well have been considered an extra blessing to the future groom. Third, she was sexually pure. She is described as a *young woman who had not known a man intimately*, suggesting her strong character and spiritual compatibility for marriage to Isaac.

#### **VERSE 17**

The servant was not engulfed in Rebekah's beauty. He remained steadfast in seeking God's selection. While physical attraction may initiate relationships, submission to God develops a lasting marriage. The servant did not know if the approaching girl came from an appropriate family or not. He could determine this through an interview with her. However, while a conversation might reveal some insight into her principles, her actions would demonstrate whether her words told the truth about her ethics. So the servant tested her character through the sign that he requested in prayer (see Gen. 24:14).

*(In PSG, p. 140) In what ways can our needs and our wants be different, and in what ways can they be similar? How can believers today express trust in God for their needs just as Abraham and his servant did?*

### **KEY DOCTRINE**

*Stewardship*

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him.

### **BIBLE SKILL**

*Identify names and titles for God in the text and meditate on their significance.*

In Genesis 24:1-17 both Abraham and the servant employ several designations for God. They call Him *the Lord*, *God of heaven*, *God of earth*, and *God of my master Abraham*. Reflect on each designation. What is its significance in the storyline? What does each designation reveal about God? What is the significance of that revelation to your own life? How can you apply your answers to your daily life?

### **BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR**

For additional context, read “Ancient Mesopotamia” in the Fall 2015 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).