

A Marriage Made in Heaven

Genesis 24: 61-67

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One of the most important human relationships, probably the most important one of all, is the one known as marriage. It's been around for a long, long time. In fact, if you look within the pages of the Bible, it's right there in the very beginning. In the book of Genesis we are told that because Adam was lonely, unable to find a suitable companion among any of the other creatures in the Garden of Eden, God did something special. Taking a bit of Adam's own flesh, a rib from his side, He made Eve and brought her to the man. It was literally a marriage made in heaven.

Furthermore, there are numerous marriage stories through the Bible. Here's just a few of them—Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Boaz, David and Bathsheba, Esther and the king of Persia, and, of course, the most wonderful one of all, Mary and Joseph. They were not all perfect, but they were all blessed and used by God to achieve His purposes for humanity, ultimately being fulfilled in the miraculous birth and divinely ordained ministry of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

These marriage relationships also served another purpose. They were a reflection of the relationship which God desires to have with His people and the relationship that God's people need to have with one another. Paul speaks about this in his letter to the Ephesians. As he concludes his letter, he writes, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32). For Paul the marriage relationship also described the kind of relationship that Christ has with the church, an idea which is repeated in other places in God's Word. In Revelation 19:6-9, for example, there is the wedding feast of the Lamb. This is an obvious reference to the joyous celebration which takes place in heaven when the church and Christ are joined together for all of eternity.

As Sherry and I discussed the arrival of Ben Banner and his family last week, she suggested that this might be an appropriate way of describing what will take place when he becomes our pastor. I gave that thought some serious consideration, and the Lord confirmed her insight by reminding me of a passage of Scripture in the Old Testament. Chapter 24 in the book of Genesis describes the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. Since it is a rather long passage of Scripture, only the concluding verses were read this morning. So let me take a few moments to tell you the rest of the story.

After Sarah, Abraham's wife died, he decided that it was time for Isaac, his son, to have a wife. God had told Abraham that Isaac was the child of promise. Through him offspring would be born as numerous as the stars in the sky. That, of course, could not take place unless Isaac became a father and that could not take place unless he first had a wife. Not wanting Isaac to choose a wife from the native Canaanites, a people from a different culture with differing beliefs and gods, Abraham decided that a bride from among his relatives in Haran, the place from which he had immigrated years earlier was a better idea. But instead of sending Isaac to that far distant land with the possibility that he might never return, he chose to send his trusted chief servant, Eliezer. It would be his responsibility to find a wife of Isaac.

After many days of travel, he arrived at the locale where Abraham's relatives were living. Stopping at a spring near the town, Eliezer knew that he was facing a serious challenge. How was he going to find a wife for Isaac in a foreign place among people that he did not know? Watching the local girls coming to draw water from the spring for their animals, he decided it was time to pray. He said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See I am standing beside this spring and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink' and she says, 'Drink, and I will water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac" (Genesis 24:13-14). Guess what? Before he had even finished praying, a beautiful young woman arrived and immediately responded to his request with the very words that he had spoken in his prayer. That night he was offered lodging in the home of this lovely young woman named Rebekah. Soon, thereafter, Eliezer was headed back home with a bride for Isaac.

Now, how does this Biblical account have anything to do with the calling of our new pastor? Are there any observations that we can draw from this marriage narrative that we can apply to our church and the new relationship which we will be establishing with Ben and his family? I believe there are. Let me share three of them with you:

- First, the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca was a marriage of strangers. They had never met or even seen one another until they encountered one another in the fields outside of the place where Isaac was living. Rebecca may have known a little bit about Isaac from what Abraham's servant told her, but Isaac knew absolutely nothing at all. Once they were married there was a lot to learn about one another, like the young man who said of his new bride, "She's really a neat housekeeper. If I drop my socks on the floor, she picks them up. If I throw my clothes around the house, she hangs them in the closet. And you know what, I got up the other morning at 3:00 am, went to the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice. When I returned to the bedroom, she'd made up the bed." Like that young couple, there are going to be a lot of new things that we will have to learn when

Ben becomes our pastor. There will be a lot of things that he will have to learn about us. We will be surprised at times and so will he. It will take a little time for us to get to know one another.

- Second, the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca was a marriage of intermediaries. Abraham's servant was sent on a mission to find a bride for Isaac. It was a difficult and time-consuming process. He had to go to a foreign land not knowing when and how he would find a suitable mate for his master's son. The only thing he had to go on was that he was sent to look for a bride that came from a similar family background and that without God's help, his chances of success were minimal. The same might be said of our Pastor Nominating Committee. Yes, they were afforded the assistance of the local Presbytery in finding someone from a similar denominational background, but without God's help they would not have been successful. They sought His guidance during the two years of their search and that made all the difference. Although they did not have to travel thousands of miles to meet our new pastor—modern technology can be quite helpful—it was nevertheless a difficult and at times a frustrating journey. But once they arrived and had an opportunity to meet and become acquainted with Ben and his family, they were confident that God had led them to the right person.

- Finally, the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca was a marriage ordained of God. He was the One who answered Eliezer's prayer and I suspect He was also the one who gave Rebecca the assurance that marrying someone whom she had never met was the right thing to do. Likewise, choosing a new pastor or from the pastor's perspective serving a new church, is a whole lot like buying a pig in a poke. You really don't know what you're getting until you open the bag. I can testify to the truthfulness of that statement. When I was called to pastor the church in Portsmouth, Virginia where I served for thirty years, I didn't know a whole lot about what I was getting into and I suspect they didn't either. But there was one thing I did know beyond a shadow of a doubt. That was precisely where God wanted me to be. It was his decision not mine. I am confident that Ben feels the same way and I hope that in the days to come you will feel that way too.

So in conclusion let me ask you, "Are marriages made in heaven?" The answer is, "No, they are not. They are made right here on earth with all of the challenges and heartaches that we face as human beings." Nevertheless, as many of you can testify, marriages can acquire the blessings and support of a loving heavenly Father who wants us to experience all of the joy and fulfillment that a marriage relationship has to offer this side of Glory. The same is true of the relationship between a new pastor and a new congregation. So instead of saying or even hoping that it will be like a marriage made in heaven, let me recommend that we think of it as a marriage made by heaven. If we think about the relationship with our new pastor in that way, we'll be right in step with the same Lord and God who has been watching over and guiding our church for the past 181 years.