

“GREAT WOMEN OF THE BIBLE -- REBEKAH”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Gen. 24-27

They say “all the world loves a lover.” I’m not sure I know what that means, but I am certain there are very few sons and daughters of the sod who do not love a love story. Rare indeed is one “with soul so dead” whose heart is not strangely warmed at the telling or reading of a tale about the ways of a man with a maid.

For that reason the story of Rebekah has special allure for us. Romance with a capital “R” is written into nearly every line of the 24th chapter of Genesis. More than any other woman in the Bible, Rebecca spells romance, and as Clarence McCartney points out,

“Her story is all the more engaging because she is in love with a man she has never seen.”

The narrative begins with the death of Sarah, Abraham’s beloved wife. For nearly a century, if we read the Old Testament correctly, these two had lived and loved together, and her homegoing left a great void in Abraham’s life. For three years he mourns her, during which time he centers his love and devotion upon their son, Isaac, the child of promise.

As he works through his grief, the aged patriarch begins to reckon with the reality of his own mounting years, and the knowledge that he has not yet provided for the carrying on of God’s chosen children by selecting a wife for Isaac.

Since it was the custom at that time for parents to pick a life partner for their offspring, Abraham summons Eliezer, his chief steward, and the man who serves as general manager of his far-flung empire. To Eliezer goes the task of finding Isaac a wife, and he is to follow very specific rules --

1. Isaac is not to marry one of the local Canaanite women. This now grown child of promise must not to be “unequally yoked” with an unbeliever.

2. Eliezer is to journey some 500 miles to Mesopotamia where Abraham's kinsmen abide.
3. There, from within the family circle as it were, he is to pick a bride for Isaac
4. As a final word of encouragement, Abraham promises Eliezer that God will "send his angel before thee."

Eliezer organizes a caravan of camels laden with both the necessities of travel, and treasures for this first of all Cinderellas whomever she may be, and sets out on his romantic mission.

Throughout the course of his journey, the faithful old steward maintains an attitude of prayer. He realizes Isaac is the channel through whom God will make Abraham "the father of many nations." Great care must be used in the selection of his life's partner. If, in haste or poor judgment, he selects the wrong girl, disaster will befall the seed of Israel's race and this family of God may die of aborning.

Application

My! what grievous problems we would save ourselves if we followed the same practice. If, through prayer, we sought God's will in the various decisions of life. If, instead of hastening headlong into relationships, purchases, obligations and encumbering involvements we sought the mind of God in the matter. How many heartaches and headaches would be avoided by the simple practice of praying about it? For, as the lilting spiritual reminds us, "a little talk with Jesus makes it right," all right! To his eternal credit and benefit, Eliezer is a man of prayer.

When he finally reaches his destination, he rests his caravan at the well just outside the city of Nahor, and once again bows in prayer. This time he asked to be led along clearly defined lines. In substance he says,

"Close all doors, except the one door through which I am to go."

Specifically he asks that the girl from whom he asks a drink of water and who gives it to him, and then voluntarily offers to draw water for his camels, is to be the one God has appointed as Isaac's wife.

He has hardly concluded his prayer, when Rebekah comes to the well to secure her family's evenings supply of water. The Bible says simply, “She was very fair to look upon.”

Unaware she is being watched with great interest, or that the forces of destiny are rushing forward at breakneck speed and are about to converge upon her, Rebekah lowers her pitcher into the well as she has done 1,000 times before. When she lifts it back up overflowing with cool, clear water, Eliezer steps forward and asks for a drink. The young girl complies with his request, and then graciously offers to draw water for his camels, too.

To Eliezer, this is a remarkable answer to his prayer. But when he also learns, wonders of wonders, this charming lass is actually a relative of Abraham, the faithful steward is overcome with joy. She is not only gracious, beautiful and industrious, she is also from Abraham's tribe. In great excitement, Eliezer presents Rebekah with several pieces of jewelry, including a golden earring, the ancient symbol of betrothal, and in gratitude to God for so wondrously answering his prayer, Eliezer bows down in worship for the most high.

Application

What an indictment this is of many of us. How quick we are to ask *of* God. How slow to give thanks *to* God when he answers our prayer. How eager we are to receive *from* him, how hesitant we are to give *to* him. How ready we are to storm heaven's gates when the tide of life turns against us, but when the storm has passed we soon forget him, and whatever wee measure of gratitude we feel is seldom translated into concrete deeds.

Not so with Eliezer. He prays for guidance and he gets it. He asks for an answer and he receives it. Then, as an act of adoration and thanksgiving, the old matchmaker bows his head and worships God saying,

“Blessed be the Lord God of my father Abraham, who hath not left my master destitute of his mercy and his truth” (Gen.24:26,27).

In the meantime, Rebekah has hurried home to tell her elder brother, Laban, of this visitor from afar, and to show off her beautiful presents. Apparently, because her father had died, Laban rushes out to meet Eliezer and to take care of the family's interest. There he hears the thrilling tale of how God has brought them all together.

Rebekah listens with fascination as Eliezer describes Isaac, and when she realizes he is actually the child of promise through whom God's covenant is to be carried out, she can hardly contain herself. What a joy and privilege it will be to work together with Isaac in the development of God's chosen people. When Laban asks whether or not she is willing to go with Eliezer to a strange, distant land, and to wed a young man whom she has never met, she answers unhesitatingly, “I will go.”

It must have seemed like an endless journey to Rebekah. How impatient she must have been to meet the young man whom, having not seen, she loved. And then one day, as the caravan drew near a particularly fertile field, Eliezer draws his camel up beside Rebekah's and directs her attention to a stalwart young man whose garments identify him to be a man of means. His thoughtful demeanor and measured steps indicate he is lost in deep meditation as he wanders alone through the pasture land. “There is your beloved,” Eliezer says to her. With a quiet prayer that she may be acceptable in his sight, Rebekah modestly lowers a veil across her face, alights from the camel and walks toward him.

Thus it is that Isaac meets his bride. When Eliezer tells him of the miraculous way in which God has guided him and answered their prayers, Isaac knows this is indeed the girl of his dreams. He takes Rebekah into his mother's tent, a sacred place to Isaac, and she becomes his wife. In the sweet, but simple language of the Bible,

“He loved her, and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death”
(Gen. 24:67).

We learn a great deal about Rebekah through this lovely story of romance. For one thing, we

know that in her youth she was very beautiful. One artist, who has portrayed her in her later years, has caught something of the regal nature of this fascinating person in the dark, patrician profile, the gentle but expressive eyes, and the firm but pensive mood or pose.

“Here is no veiled shrinking, oriental woman,” says Henry T. Sell in his wonderful book, Studies of Famous Bible Women. “Here is one in whom strong and rugged traits predominate.” Beautiful and romantic in her youth, strong and decided in her character, vigorous and energetic in her actions, Rebekah is one of those people who “plans her work and works her plan.” She loves with all her soul. When she acts, she gives it everything she has. When her course is set, she accepts the consequences, be they good or ill, without complaint.

Someone has said,

“Perfection is only a multitude of little things joined together, but perfection itself is no little thing.”

While Rebekah is not without fault, as we shall see, her noble character nonetheless marks her as one of the great women of the Bible, who, even when wrong, is motivated by high ambition and holy purpose.

For twenty years following their union, this marriage made in heaven remains childless. Even so, Isaac keeps Rebekah as his only wife. He rejects the common practice of polygamy, believing that if God can work a miracle in the case of Sarah and Abraham resulting in his own birth, God can and will work a miracle again. In God’s good time Rebekah will conceive, and God’s promise to make Abraham the father of many nations will be kept.

However, it is during this twenty or so years, that something happens which causes Rebekah to lose a little faith in Isaac. Because of a famine, things have not been going well in Beersheba. So Isaac and Rebekah move to the territory of the Philistines where conditions are a bit better. Because Rebekah is a beautiful woman, Isaac is afraid someone might desire her and do him in to get her, so he passes her off as his sister. This not only reveals Isaac’s lack of faith in God, but

also exposes a strain of fear which the courageous and deeply devout Rebekah finds difficult to tolerate. There is evidence to support the conclusion that, from that moment on, this marriage made in heaven loses a bit of its luster.

In due time twin sons are born to Rebekah and she names them Esau and Jacob. It's not every woman who knows beforehand what her children will be like, and the use of to which Rebekah puts her foreknowledge, suggests most mothers are better off not knowing.

At any rate, she is informed by an oracle of the Lord that she is to have two sons, that each of them will rule a nation, but that the older will serve the younger.

To those of us living today, this doesn't seem to be terribly significant, but in Rebekah's day the rule of primogeniture was rigidly practiced. That was the system of giving special blessing, honor and inheritance to the *firstborn* son, without regard to his aptitude or other qualifications.

The news that this does *not* to apply in the case of her sons, astounds Rebekah. This is absolutely contrary to traditions and, as Mary the mother of Jesus does centuries later, Rebekah “ponders these things in her heart.”

As the boys grow into manhood, she centers her affection and attention on Jacob, the younger of the twins. Isaac, unaware of this revelation from the Lord and in keeping with tradition, gives his attention to the firstborn, Esau. The result is tension between the brothers and between the parents.

But what man is a match for a clever woman? Surely not Isaac! By the time the boys have reached maturity, Rebekah has so indoctrinated Jacob with the idea that he is to take precedence over his elder brother, when he has the opportunity to purchase Esau's birthright from him, Jacob does so.

Let's not leap to the conclusion that this reveals a defect in Jacob's character. As a matter of fact, it reveals a very important weakness in *Esau's* makeup. A weakness which is further substantiated by the fact, that, in direct opposition to the wishes of his parents, he not only marries a heathen woman, but takes two wives unto himself, and thus returns to the practice of polygamy which his father had so nobly set aside.

We must not judge Jacob because he accepts Esau's willingness to sell his birthright for a “mess of pottage.” Rather, we should look upon this as an explanation for the earlier prophecy that “the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). At the same time, we must not casually gloss over what Jacob *does* later on, at the direction and insistence of his mother.

Rebekah remembers God's prophecy and, because it is clearly evident to her that Esau cannot be trusted with the paternal blessing and birthright -- that under the influence of his heathen wives he is almost certain to forget Jehovah and fall into superstition and idolatry -- Rebekah decides to play God herself. Like Sarah, her mother-in-law, who also was unwilling to let God work in *his* way and time, Rebekah takes matters into her own hands. She begins to bend things to her will. She believes in God's word, but she cannot trust him to fulfill it without her help.

Instead of telling *Isaac* of God's revelation concerning the twins, pointing out Esau's very evident weakness in character and attempting thereby to convince the father by logic that his older son is not really worthy of a blessing, Rebekah devises a clever plan to deceive her aging mate who has grown feeble and blind.

Jacob will remove his clothes which smell of the sheep he has been tending, and will put on his brothers clothes which have the odor of the woods in which he so often hunted. Then, because Esau is a hairy man and Jacob is smooth of skin, Rebekah instructs Jacob to cover his arms and hands with something akin to long gloves made from the soft silky pelts of a young goat. In the meantime, Rebekah makes a flavorsome dish of venison meat such as the older boy often cooked for his father, and then, decked out in this garb, and bearing his father's favorite dish, Jacob is to

enter Isaac's tent and attempt to receive the paternal blessing by falsely claiming to be his brother.

If only Rebekah had used her clever, inventive mind positively instead of negatively.

If only she had sought to find God's way of fulfilling God's will.

If only she had kept her fears in check.

If only she had remembered God's part in the affairs of men.

How many heartaches would have been avoided?

Application

Perhaps, as you look back upon your life, you can say a sad “amen.” God always has something better for us than we can plan for ourselves. His way is always best. The end rarely justifies the means. Contrary to what some say, God never honors falsehood, even though perpetrated for worthy ends. And we are fools, if, like Rebekah, we insist upon taking the reins of our life into our own hands, planning our destiny with little or no thought of him.

God wants nothing more than to give you his best. He is anxious to relieve you from all anxiety and uncertainty about both your present and your future. He has promised to guide and guard all who commit their way to him. He has a plan for your life, even as he had a plan for Rebekah's life.

God also has a plan for your children's lives, even as he had a plan for Jacob and Esau. Those plans are good. They suit each child to a “t.” But hear me, dear ones, sorrow and sadness will come into your life if you insist upon playing God. If, like Rebekah, you suppose your nearness to a problem qualifies you to answer it on your own.

As A.W. Tozier says so powerfully,

“God has wisdom and knowledge you know not of. He sees the end from the beginning, and has access to the facts of which you are not aware.”

And if Rebekah had waited long enough and looked far enough, she could have seen God working out that which he had promised, in a way which was both right and fair.

But, as an unknown poet put it,

“Oh dangerous wiles of cunning! At what cost
Ye gain faith’s prize! Too eager to procure,
Ye try by human artifice to ensure
What, if God-promised, never can be lost.”

This is a lesson Rebekah learned too late. Her scheme is put in place and Jacob enters his father’s tent.

As Rebekah awaits the outcome, she begins to nervously toy with the bracelet on her arm. She reaches up to fondle the golden earring, remembering how, long years before, it had been given to her as a symbol of the love of a man she had never known, and whom now she seeks to deceive.

In a short time Jacob returns. The deception has not been easy. Isaac may be old and blind, but he’s not stupid. He senses something is awry and stretches out trembling hands to touch the figure before him. The goat-skin gloves do the trick.

“The voice is Jacob’s voice,” he says, “but the hands are the hands of Esau.”

To be completely sure, he reaches out for the clothing and smells them. They have the odor of the hills and he is convinced. And so, the blind patriarch, now feeble and near death, summons what remains of his strength and earnestly, solemnly and lovingly gives Jacob the blessing,

“Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee, be Lord over thy brethren
and let thy mother’s sons bow to thee. Cursed be they that curseth thee, and blessed
be they that blesseth thee” (Gen. 27:29).

When Esau returns from the hut and discovers he has been exploited, he is livid with anger. The aged father tries to compensate by offering his firstborn son a kind of second-rate blessing, but Esau’s anger cannot be stilled. He threatens to take his brother’s life and, to protect himself, Jacob flees to a distant land.

Thus it is that Rebekah pays for her deception by having to give up what she loves most, her favorite son. Never again is she permitted to see the face of Jacob. Nor is he permitted to see hers. When he finally returns home years later, Rebekah lies cold and still, by the side of Issac, Abraham and Sarah, in a quiet tomb.

Application

Somewhere the Bible says,

“Be sure your sins will find you out” (Num.32:23).

It might also say, be sure your folly will also find you out, for many of the things we do which lead us into trouble are not so sinful, as they are stupid.

God grant you will learn from this great woman of the Bible, and harness whatever urge within you to play God within your life, or in the lives of your children.

God grant you will reckon with the fact that what he has promised, God is able to perform!

That to live in his will is your highest joy.

That in this cup there are no bitter dregs.

That along this path there are no sad regrets.

God grant you will accept the truth of this simple maxim,

“Light obeyed increaseth light,

Light resisted bringeth night.”

God grant you will turn over the reins of your life, and those of your children, to him who does all thing well, and will live in the sweet assurance “it is God who worketh in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).