

God can be Trusted

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Date: 26 September 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well, believe it or not, it's the last sermon in our Abraham series today, and it's been a privilege to try to bring the Word to you from this portion of God's Scripture. Especially the last couple of weeks, I found that the story has been ministering to me personally, and I pray that it's been the same for you as well.

And I'll certainly love to know what you have learned or what you've been reflecting on as a result of listening to Genesis 12 to 25. So do let me know how you'll find it.

Especially after this sermon. But today, we are looking at the last part. As you can see, it's the longest chapter in the whole Genesis story, but we'll make our way through it, so make sure that the Bible is open in front of you, and also a sermon outline might be helpful as well.

Let's again pray to our sovereign God. Heavenly Father, you are indeed the one who goes before us, and you establish our steps.

Will you even establish our steps right now as we get ready to listen to your sermon. Prepare our hearts to be ready to hear from you, our living God, and help us to renew our trust in you.

[1 : 1 3] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. After last week's sermon, I had a conversation with someone who asked me some very thoughtful questions about what he had heard.

Pastor, he asked, if we're hoping for something to come to pass, how long should we wait? How do we know if God's answer is yes or no? And as we talked more, I suggested that really, the big question he was asking was this.

How do I know if this or that is God's will for my situation? And what should I do in the meantime? And that's a question we all ask, don't we? What university course should I choose, especially as the deadline for applications are drawing near?

Should I change jobs, or should I persist in my current one? How actively should I be looking for a life partner? To the point of deliberately changing my circumstances, even changing my church?

How many children should we have? How much money should I set aside? And how much should I give? Could God be calling me into full-time ministry? What's my next step after I retire?

[2 : 1 8] How do I know if this or that is God's will for my situation? And what should I do in the meantime? Well, the good news is that today's passage will begin to address those kinds of questions.

That was the pleasant surprise I found when I sat down on Tuesday to study today's passage, and especially as I probably didn't give a great answer to this fine young man's questions. Now, let's mention first of all what this passage isn't about.

Genesis 24 sometimes is taken as a chapter all about how you should find a wife. You know, step one, make sure you're in a place where you can meet lots of girls. Step two, make sure to pray before and during courtship, and especially pray verse 12.

Make me successful today. And then step three, don't leave the family out of it. Keep them informed. That will keep everyone happy. And yet, if we take Genesis 24 as a step-by-step blueprint for finding a mate, just how far do we go?

Do we need to have camels ready to find a spouse? Do we have to travel to another country? Do I need to give a costly bridal dowry? But of course, when we read Genesis 24 in the context of the whole Abraham story, we begin to realize that this passage isn't about dating tips, though perhaps there might be a few things here and there that are suggestive.

[3 : 43] It is about a love story, but not one between a guy and a girl. Rather, in context, this is a love story between God and His will.

This is a love story about how God never goes back on His vows. And it's a beautifully orchestrated story. And precisely because Genesis 24 is a love story with divine choreography, therefore, Genesis 24 becomes a story that can begin to teach us how no matter what situation we're in, we can still live lives that are in line with His will.

We don't have to worry we'll miss out on it. We don't have to be paralyzed by uncertainty. And so let's enter this story. And as we do, let me draw three lessons from our passage this morning.

How should we live even when we're not sure of the specific steps we should take? Well, here's our first lesson. Act faithfully in line with what God has revealed to us.

Act faithfully in line with what God has revealed to us. In verse 1, Abraham is now very old. A long life, of course, is regarded as a great blessing, generally speaking.

[5 : 03] And as he enters the final lap, the Lord has indeed blessed him in every way. We can see from the details of this story that he's wealthy. But more importantly, in the context of Genesis 12-25, he's blessed because God is beginning to realize His promises through him.

But of course, old age also means there's greater urgency to sort out your family affairs because you can go anytime. And Abraham recognizes that Isaac is still unmarried.

And behind that state of affairs lies the bigger question. Will the promises die with Abraham? God has been so good, but will that goodness extend beyond Abraham?

After all, for there to be a great nation, Isaac must have children. For the land to be passed down, there must be descendants. But Abraham knows by now that God is trustworthy.

God has revealed His promises to him, and that provides the grounds for his following actions. Knowing he's too old to travel any great distances, he summons his servant.

[6 : 20] Verse 2. As someone who's in charge of all of Abraham's assets, this servant is clearly someone Abraham trusts. Perhaps he's even someone who shares the faith, given he's to swear by the Lord.

And Abraham says to this servant, I've got a really important job for you. You've got to find a bride for my son. But you can't just find any random girl.

There's a non-negotiable. She cannot be a Canaanite. Why not? Is Abraham being xenophobic here? Is he a bigot?

No, because this isn't about race, but about faith. This isn't Abraham being a racist, but Abraham holding to the promise. The Canaanites, of course, did not worship Yahweh.

They did not declare allegiance to the God of Abraham. But God's promise required a line who profess faith in the Lord in order for the promises to be handed down.

[7 : 25] Should Canaanite religion enter into the picture, it could easily have taken Isaac's very heart away from God, as well as those of his children.

And before you know it, they would all have walked away from God's covenant. That's certainly what the law of Moses would later warn about in places like Exodus 24, verse 16, and Deuteronomy 7, verse 3 and 4.

And that's exactly what happens later on in Israel's history, not least in King Solomon, whose marriage to Canaanite wives did turn his heart away from God.

That's why even in the New Testament, God says that Christians choosing non-Christians as life partners is such a bad idea, because it almost always leads to conflict and eventually compromise.

After all, when your fundamental allegiances are so different, how would they not be compromised? And the compromise usually goes one way. It's usually the Christian, not the non-Christian, who compromises.

[8 : 33] Of course, praise God, there's occasionally exceptions. God is gracious. But ask most pastors and they'll tell you the same. So this is the non-negotiable.

And so that means verse 4, the best place to look for a suitable candidate is in Abraham's kampong. But what happens, the servant asks in verse 5, if the woman doesn't want to come back, how then?

Should I take Isaac to then balik kampong? And Abraham says, no, verse 6. That would completely go against the grain of the promises. God had told Abraham he would settle in the land, he would show him.

And so for Isaac to balik kampong would be a reversal of this entire journey of faith. It might make him forget the promises. Now, Abraham is confident that God would go before the servant to prepare the way, verse 7.

But if there really is no willing lady, the servant is released from his oath, verse 8. God will somehow still make a way. The most important thing is that Isaac not be placed in a situation which might threaten his faithfulness to the covenant.

[9 : 52] That's Abraham's greatest concern as a parent. You see, what is Abraham doing here? He's acting in line with what he knows of God's plan and promises.

He's acting in line with what God has revealed to him. You see, Abraham knows that in light of God's revealed promises, Isaac would need a wife.

What he doesn't know is who that's going to be, how that's going to happen, or when it might come to pass. And so like all of us, I'm sure he would have liked it if God had told him all those specific details.

He would have liked it if God told him as he scrutinized every woman that passed by, by the way, Abraham, this is the one.

He would have liked crystal clear direction. And I think that's what many of us want too, that would make life much simpler, wouldn't it?

[10 : 58] God, just tell me what to do so that I don't even need to think about it. Should I take that job or not? Should I go to that event or not? And so we look for techniques to find God's will.

We want our pastors and Bible teachers to tell us which inner voice we should listen to, or what sort of special sign we should look for, or what degree of peace we should feel to discover what God wants.

We want that because subconsciously we believe there must be one specific choice in our particular situation that God wants us to make, but he has hidden it from us.

He's not told us what it is. And so we must try to find it the way we try to find WALL-E in those who has WALL-E puzzle books. Because we fear that if we don't get it right, if we make the wrong choice, we'll have completely missed out on God's plan.

And who wants to miss out on God's plan? But Abraham doesn't feel the need to do any of that. He doesn't go trying to find God's will because he already knows it.

[12 : 20] He knows what God's eternal sovereign plan is. to give him descendants, land, and blessing. That's God's will. God told him. And he knows he shouldn't do anything that will take Isaac away from those promises.

That's also clearly God's will. And so although he doesn't know everything, he acts in line with what he knows.

So he entrusts this task to his servant, making sure that he knows what the non-negotiables are. He shows wisdom with some contingency planning.

When the servant asks what happens if there is no women willing to move, he makes sure to state that it's better that Isaac stays unmarried rather than move back.

To him, it's not contrary to faith to do all that. In fact, that's part of acting with faith. And that's how we should act.

[13 : 22] We don't know everything. But do we know God's eternal sovereign plan? Yes, we do. It's for people to come to know and trust Jesus as Saviour, so that they will bow before him as Lord.

What is his will for us therefore? To be in relationship with him and seek to be godly in every area of our lives. How do we know all this?

Simple. By reading our Bibles. That's where God told us. That's where we discover God's revealed will, his promises to us. And so as we keep reading and becoming more and more familiar with God's one big story, God says to us, act faithfully in line with what you know.

Of course sometimes that seems unsatisfying to us because it still doesn't necessarily tell us exactly whether we should take that job or not, or what we should do exactly in that situation.

But that's because God doesn't want to be treated like Google. You know how we use Google, right? When we want to know something, we Google it. But we don't treat Google like a person.

[14 : 44] we don't treat Google as someone we love, someone we spend time with, someone we long to please, someone we trust. And God is not Google.

He's a person. And so we don't relate to him the way we relate to Google. And he doesn't relate to us the way Google relates to us, as an information dispenser.

no. He wants us to know him as the good, faithful, dependable, promise-keeping God.

And he wants us to trust him. Not use him as a crystal ball. He wants us, even though he has not told us everything, to act faithfully in line with what he's told us.

And that's different from so many other religions where we tend to use God simply to divine the future. And that brings us to our second lesson for today.

[15 : 54] Secondly, trust our kind and faithful God for his providence. Trust our faithful and kind God for his providence. In verses 10 and 11, the servant sets out and eventually finds himself just outside the town of Nehor.

It's evening time and that's when the women would usually come out to draw water from the wells. And so the servant does what we all do when we seek guidance.

He prays, verse 12, Lord, Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today and show kindness to my master Abraham.

See, I'm 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 young woman, please let down your jar that I may have a drink.

And she says, drink and I'll water your camels too. Let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have showed kindness to my master.

[17 : 01] So the servant asks for a sign. Does that invalidate what I said earlier? No, I don't think so. There's nothing wrong with asking for a sign per se.

Indeed, here it shows the servant's utter reliance on God because he has no other means to discern who's the right girl, being in a foreign place with absolutely zero contacts.

But what God does not look favourably upon is a posture that demands signs. We know that from the rest of the Bible. Think of that episode in Matthew 12, for example, where the Pharisees and teachers of the law approach Jesus and say to him, teacher, we want a sign from you.

And what is Jesus' reply? A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign. Or think of John's Gospel, where Jesus deliberately avoids those seeking more signs.

But that's not the servant's posture. He makes his request for a sign at the beginning of verse 14, but notice what comes before and after that request in verses 12 and 13 and the end of verse 14.

[18 : 21] He says, God, I know you have shown kindness to my master. You have always been faithful to all your promises all these decades.

And so, in light of what I already know about you, show yourself to be true one more time. And so, this isn't a self-focused prayer.

This isn't a letter of demand. Rather, it's an appeal to God's character, grounded in the revealed promises of God. And it's also a prayer based on a firm belief that God is absolutely sovereign.

He can orchestrate everything. And the rest of chapter 24 is basically a vindication of this belief. In verse 14, there's a test inherent in the sign the servant asked for.

You see, he doesn't just ask for a general sign like, oh, you know, if there's a young woman who's carrying a white jar, oh, I know, that's the one, right? No. He says, the right girl must not only offer him a drink, but offer to water his camels.

[19 : 34] Now, from what I understand, that's a lot of work because camels drink lots and lots of water. And the servant has ten of them. Whoever offers to do that will be there all evening.

And so anybody who offers to do that certainly won't be typical. She will be someone who goes beyond the core of duty to show hospitality.

Indeed, this is a very high bar for the servant to set. But verse 15, even before the servant has finished his prayer, here comes Rebecca.

The narrator immediately lets us know that she's the daughter of Bethuel. She's from Abraham's clan. So that means she's not a Canaanite. Check.

She's a virgin, so single. Check. She's beautiful too, not a requirement, but a bonus of sorts. And so we, the readers, are getting excited.

[20 : 36] Rebecca has all the right credentials. But don't forget, our servant doesn't know that yet. Instead, he simply thinks, here's candidate number one.

And so he hurries to meet her, verse 17, and sure enough, verse 18, she offers him a drink without any hesitation. And so our excitement increases.

But the narrator teases us a little bit. There's a little pause as the servant drinks, and we're left wondering, will she take the next step?

And in verse 19, she does. I'll get water for your camels too, she says. And so this is instantaneous answer to prayer.

We see the hand of God straight away. But remember, the servant doesn't know yet. He doesn't have all the information we've been given.

[21 : 35] And that's why verse 21, though he sees that the sign he's asked for has been fulfilled, he doesn't automatically take that as success.

What's more important is still the non-negotiable requirement Abraham has stipulated. Is she a Canaanite or not? You see, even signs still have to be tested and measured by God's word.

And so he finds a way to figure out that information by asking for accommodation, verse 23. And there he receives confirmation that she indeed isn't a Canaanite, verses 24 and 25.

And now, all this pent-up excitement that the servant is undoubtedly feeling can be released. In verses 26 and 27, he says, praise God.

He really has been leading me all the way. He made sure that I was at the right well, at the right time, in the right place so that I can meet the right person.

[22 : 41] This is nothing less than the providence of God. This is nothing less than the hand of a kind and faithful God. And just in case we don't get it, we get the entire story recounted for us again.

in verses 34 to 49, as the servant relates this story to Rebecca's family. Now, this might seem quite tedious to us, but it's the Old Testament's way of showing us that something has indeed come to pass.

It's the Bible's way of underlining the providential hand of God. You see, this is who God is.

You could even say this is how God is. He's the kind and faithful God. Something the servant says over and over and over again.

In verses 12 and 14 and 27 and verse 49. And in verses 50 to 51, Rebecca's father and brother agrees.

[23 : 51] They say, this is from the Lord. this is the Lord's direction. And so they don't stand in her way. Take her and go.

You see, this story isn't really about what signs to look for to discern God's will. No, it's about how God's will is always accomplished as he orchestrates and choreographs every little detail.

That's what theologians mean when they talk about the providence of God as we heard earlier in the service. Basically, it means that nothing ever happens to a Christian by chance.

There are no accidents, no coincidences. Providence is when God is working through all things by his wisdom and power for the accomplishment of his purposes, for the good of his people.

Sometimes, we make the mistake of thinking that God only acts when something supernatural clearly happens. So, God parting the Red Sea? Oh, clearly God's involved.

[25 : 06] God pouring down fire from heaven? Ah, clearly God's involved. But what about the invention of modern medicine to treat all sorts of disease? No, God's not involved in that.

That was modern science. But that is to completely misunderstand how God governs our world. As the theologian Michael Horton puts it, the scriptures know nothing of a creation or a history that is at a single moment independent of God's agency.

The question is not whether God is involved in every aspect of our lives, but how. God is involved. Sometimes he does what we call the miraculous, but more often, he works through the ordinary means of life, as he does here, working through people, what time they go to the well, and that kind of thing, directing all things invisibly.

and actually, we can't detect his hand of providence, at least not straight away. What brought the servant to that very well at that very time?

What brought Rebecca to appear at the same time? Now, they wouldn't have taught anything of their actions at that moment. God's providence would only be clear in hindsight.

[26 : 37] That's how providence works. It's often invisible to us, and any significance we detect only clear in hindsight.

I see this in my own life. How did I end up in Oxford in 2003? I never planned to apply, and only did so when a teacher pulled me aside and asked me, why not?

How did I end up at the church I attended while there? I didn't plan to go there, and only changed my mind when a friendly red-haired guy took the initiative to befriend me and convince me to.

How did I end up as a ministry apprentice there? Not because I initially planned to either, but through a whole range of circumstances coming together, such as the great financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 and an unexpected vacancy coming up.

How did I end up from there back to Malaysia? Only because a major change in UK visa regulations forced me back home earlier than I anticipated. How did I eventually end up in seminary when I wasn't even sure which Bible college to go to and I had absolutely no idea how to secure funding?

[27 : 48] Only because God made sure that I crossed paths with David Cook the now retired principal of Sydney Missionary and Bible College and so on and all of that really was God preparing me to become a pastor here in Kuching in 2021 but all that is only clear in hindsight you see the providence of God is one of the most precious doctrines in the world it provides comfort it provides encouragement and it provides freedom in decision making you see God's providence is a little like a guard rail on a mountain highway some of you I'm sure are pretty familiar with the roads going up some of our high lands here in Sarawak so they're often pretty twisty and scary usually without any guard rails and so when you see one you're a little more comforted because at least there's some protection from keeping you from going over the cliffs and

God's providence is like super secure guard rails the mountain of life can sometimes get pretty twisty and scary and sometimes we just don't know what choices we should make we're not sure of all the specific details God has planned for our lives but after doing all the wise things we should do like meditating on the Bible praying and consulting wise friends we can make decisions even without all the information we wish we have because God's guard wheels of providence ensure that we will never be acting outside his plans and purposes by the way remember it's his plans and purposes not ours we probably only know in the new creation how many times we did something foolish but those guard rails protected us from going overboard that doesn't mean that

God is a puppet master and we are mere puppets in a mysterious way the Bible affirms that God governs in such a way that no detail lies outside his control and yet he delights in us as people whose actions matter we've seen this all throughout this story haven't we we've seen it in Abraham's actions earlier we see it when the servant actively prays and we see it even in Rebecca's choices you see in verse 55 there's a certain roadblock Rebecca's brother and mother says actually can she hang around for another 10 days or so then after that she can go and so certainly there's a bit of tension again are they having second thoughts but the servant insists verse 56 that we've got to go now and so they agree that the final decision should rest with Rebecca in verse 58 the climactic question is posed will you go with this man and she replies like

Abraham all those decades ago I will go and so she does with a blessing ringing in her ears verse 60 that is similar to the blessing first given back to Abraham in Genesis 12 Rebecca doesn't know what lies ahead but she is trusting the faithful and kind God in his providence and that brings us briefly to the third lesson for today be reassured because God keeps on being faithful and kind even beyond the grave in verses 62 to 67 we find the conclusion to this love story Isaac is in the fields being contemplative when he looks up and sees the servant with Rebecca and in verse 66 the servant told Isaac all he had done we're not told his report but surely it must have been the same one he told

Rebecca's family back in verses 32 to 49 the providence of God is once again testified to and so verse 67 this ends in a wedding Isaac marries Rebecca but of course as those who have been following Abraham's story from the very beginning we know it's more than just one man marrying a woman think of the structure of Genesis 23 to 25 last week in Genesis 23 Sarah dies and this week in Genesis 25 Abraham dies but do the promises die with them no because of Genesis 24 God is ensuring that his promises live on beyond the grave the promises that will form the very essence of how he will one day redeem the world they will flow through Isaac to Jacob to Moses and to Israel to David and finally unto Jesus and through

[33 : 28] Jesus we find the stage set for the greatest love story of all as divinely orchestrated by the triune God as the church would later proclaim in Acts 4 verse 27 to 28 indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed but notice the next sentence they did what your power and your will had decided beforehand would happen from Genesis to Revelation God is choreographing his one big story driving it towards its happy ending for one day just as Abraham does for Isaac the heavenly father will also provide for his beloved son a bride there will be a wedding banquet at the end of time but how will he do that through trustworthy servants who will call that bride from amongst the nations servants who will prayerfully go in search of those who are ultimately meant to become part of

Jesus bride servants who are willing to act faithfully in line with what they know of God's plan Gordon Wenham is a very well regarded Old Testament commentator in fact I've been regularly consulting his Genesis commentary all throughout this series and his father John Wenham is also a well regarded scholar although interestingly a New Testament one but when John Wenham was old he and his wife were involved in a serious car accident in which his wife died but incredibly he found himself in the same hospital ward as the driver who had caused the accident which killed his wife what did John Wenham do curse this man refuse to speak to him no he told this man about the grace and forgiveness that was available in

Jesus and this man found Jesus even in this tragedy John Wenham knew God's goodness and he acted faithfully in light of his providence he acted as a trustworthy servant and he can do so because our bride groom is faithful and kind did you notice what Isaac received at the end of verse 67 upon being married to Rebecca he has comfort and so will all those who ultimately come to Jesus they might mourn for now but they will ultimately be comforted this is God being faithful and kind or if you want other signs of God's faithfulness and kindness just look down to 25 verse 7 to 11 there Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age just as

God promised in Genesis 15 his burial in that cave alongside Sarah reminds us of God's faithfulness last week in beginning to fulfill his promise of a land to Abraham and even that list of Ishmael's descendants in verses 12 to 18 testify that God is keeping his promise to Hagar that he would indeed become a great nation even in these quiet low profile words of verses 7 to 18 we see all sorts of testimonies to God's faithfulness yes even beyond the grave and so my brothers and sisters how should we live even when we are not sure of the specific steps to take in our particular situation the answer is with great faith and that's not just the lesson of Genesis 24 and 25 it's the lesson of the entire

Abraham story remember Abraham was living in the already and not yet he already has the promises he's beginning to see their fulfillment but he never sees it all fulfilled within his lifetime but he trusts even when he can't see not because he has blind faith but because even when he can't see ahead he sees the God who has proven himself completely trustworthy he lives in light of what he knows he lives in light of the promises he and we live and we live in what lies ahead when this pandemic will end what our post pandemic future would look like we too live in the already and not yet but we live in light of what we know and we know that God keeps on being faithful and kind even beyond the grave for one day he will present the bride to his son and he wants us to be there therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us throw off everything that hinders and the sins that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the rays marked out for us fixing our eyes on

[39 : 26] Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith but the joy that was set before him he endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart as you go on the journey of faith let's pray father as we come to you this morning we pray that we will indeed find refuge in the doctrine of providence that we will find refuge that you did not just create this world but you continue to sustain this world and that you sustain our very lives that you watch over our every step and so father even in this difficult times when we face so many kinds of decisions that we have to make so many things that we are just not sure about whether it is right to take this step or that step we pray that you would help us to prioritize what we do know to live in light of what we do know according to your will that we will act faithfully we will pursue wisdom as you ask us to that we will allow our character to be formed by you as you desire for us that we will choose the way of wisdom the way of

Christ and not the way of folly but help us to rest that in the end you make sure that we can keep going on that even when we go off track you would bring us back and so father help us to live in light of that truth all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ Amen