

BIRTHRIGHT BLESSINGS; MARRIAGE IN THE COVENANT

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: In the Provo *Daily Herald* on the date of Friday, July 13, 1990, page D1, I found a photo of Glynn "Scotty" Wolfe, "who holds the title as 'World's Most Married Man . . .'" He is pictured with his 27th wife, Daisy,

whom he plans to divorce to marry her 15-year-old sister. The 81-year-old ordained minister said he plans to pay for his new bride's trip from the Philippines by having Daisy, 19, pose nude for Playboy magazine for \$10,000. Neither they nor she are interested.

Somewhere in the passage of time, this ordained minister and millions of others have mislaid a correct understanding of what marriage is all about. But the voice of the scriptures and the prophets is clear on this matter, and some of the clearest teachings appear in Genesis.

In fact, no episode in the Bible teaches the importance of marriage in the covenant better than the experiences of Isaac and Rebekah. These are followed closely in the text by the accounts of the marriages of Jacob and Esau, which also teach powerful lessons about this subject.

1. ABRAHAM EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE IN THE COVENANT (ETERNAL MARRIAGE).

Brigham Young said,

There is not a young man in our community who would not be willing to travel from here to England to be married right, if he understood things as they are; there is not a young woman in our community, who loves the Gospel and wishes its blessings, that would be married in any other way; they would live unmarried until they could be married as they should be, if they lived until they were as old as Sarah before she had Isaac born to her. (Discourses of Brigham Young, p.195 - p.196)

Abraham understood this principle. When Isaac was 40 (Gen. 25:20), Abraham made the most careful of arrangements for his son's marriage. He called his trusted servant, Eliezer, and put him under oath to insure by every precaution that his son married someone worthy to continue the covenant blessings the Lord had promised him and his posterity.

The oath included these provisions.

"Thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell" (Gen 24:2)

"Thou shalt go unto my country" (24:4)

"Thou shalt go . . . to my kindred" (24:4)

"Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again" (24:6)

And the servant put his hand under the hand of Abraham his master, and sware to him concerning that matter (Gen 24:9, JST)

If we were to begin a list of the marriage decisions that matter most, based on this account, our first entry would be this one: FIND A SPOUSE WORTHY OF THE COVENANT. No matter how many other qualities one might find in a prospective mate, if this one is missing, the others are less lasting than water on a summer sidewalk.

For the journey, the servant took ten camels. Since they are important in this story, let me say a word about them. The distance to be traveled from Hebron to Haran was probably over 400 miles, perhaps as many as 450. Camels average about 3 miles per hour for about 8 hours a day. So we may assume that the trip would take 18 days of travel each way, and two additional days for Sabbath observance without travel. So the round-trip time, not counting the time in Haran, would have been about 40 days.

When Eliezer arrived in Haran, he stopped at the city well and prayed.

And he said, O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: And let it

come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master (Genesis 24:12-14).

Following Abraham's offer to sacrifice Isaac, the Lord had promised him, "In blessing I will bless thee . . ." (Gen 22:17). Eliezer asks for this blessing on that basis—the righteousness of his master whom the Lord has blessed in all things (see Gen. 24:1).

And it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher upon her shoulder. And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known the like unto her. . . (Gen. 24:15,16, JST).

There is a statement in these verses about the beauty of Rebekah: she "was very fair to look upon." But I have not and will not include external beauty in my list of important characteristics in a spouse. The media has nearly ruined the ability of our youth to think clearly and logically about such things. We are bombarded constantly with messages about *chemistry*, about physical attraction. Physical beauty is thin and temporary, but the other qualities suggested by this story are thick and eternal.

I have sometimes taught the encounter at the well between Rebekah and Abraham's servant with this caption: *JOHNNY LINGO, EAT YOUR HEART OUT!* Rebekah is not an 8-cow wife, but she is a 10-camel woman! A thirsty camel can drink up to 25 gallons of water. There are ten camels to be watered, and she must do it with whatever jar or container she has with her. The record calls it a pitcher (24:18,20) And note the location of the well. Genesis 24:16 and 45 both indicate that this water in this well is in a deep hole, probably reached by descending a spiral path or stairs. Rebekah "went down to the well, filler her pitcher, and came up." Archeologists uncovered a well of this sort at Gibeon. The water level was *80 feet* below ground level (see *Atlas of the Bible*, p. 97). And note that she hastened (24:18,20) to serve this stranger.

We can now add a second quality to our list of important attributes. WE OUGHT TO SEEK A SPOUSE WHO IS WILLING TO SERVE. There is another quality described here. IT WILL BE A GREAT BLESSING TO HAVE A SPOUSE WHO KNOWS HOW TO WORK.

Eliezer needed to know if the Lord had answered his prayer so suddenly, and asked Rebekah about her family.

And she said unto him, I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor (Gen. 24:24).

Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife among his kindred. This woman qualified. Abraham had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. Nahor had a son named Bethuel, and Rebekah was his daughter. When Eliezer learned this, he immediately “bowed down his head, and worshipped the Lord” (24:26).

In his prayer of gratitude, he teaches another important lesson about finding a spouse.

And he said, Blessed [be] the LORD God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: *I being in the way*, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren. (24:27, emphasis added).

Eliezer found a bride for Isaac because he looked for her in the right place. “I being in the way . . .” he says. This is another lesson worth teaching to the unmarried youth of Zion. AS YOU SEEK A WORTHY, ETERNAL COMPANION, STAY IN THE WAY—the strait and narrow way. That is where you are most likely to find a person worthy of the covenant. Chances of success in this diminish at dance clubs and rock concerts and undisciplined parties.

Eliezer went to the home of Rebekah and explained his mission to her father and her brother Laban. When he had finished his recitation, he said,

And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left (Gen. 24:49).

Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said

The thing proceedeth from the LORD: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before thee, take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the LORD hath spoken (Gen. 24:50,51).

Upon hearing this, the servant again bowed his head in thanksgiving before the Lord (see Gen. 24:52). There were two questions yet to be answered. Would Rebekah be willing to accompany him? and when could Eliezer begin his return journey to Hebron?

Rebekah's relatives were understandably reluctant to bid her farewell at once. They said, "Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go" (24:55). But Eliezer knew that Abraham was very old ("well stricken in age" Gen 24:1), and he also knew that Isaac wasn't getting much sleep for worry and anticipation.

And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master. (24:56)

To resolve the difference in opinion, they determined to ask Rebekah. Would she be willing to travel over 400 miles with a man she had just met to marry a man she did not know because she believed the Lord wanted her to? She said, "I will go" (24:58). Her response is every whit as impressive as that of Nephi when asked to get the plates from Laban. "I will go . . ." (1 Nephi 3:7)

Here is another lesson in seeking an eternal companion. FIND SOMEONE DISPOSED TO OBEY THE LORD.

The priesthood blessing given to Rebekah by her relatives suggests that they knew of the Abrahamic covenant: "Be thou the mother of thousands of millions . . ." (24:60)

We are told that on the day the travelers arrived in Hebron, "Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide" (24:63). Does anyone wonder what he is meditating about? I wonder what he thought when he saw the camels coming.

I do not mean to overemphasize the sequence in the final verse of Genesis 24, but it is important.

And Isaac (1) brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and (2) took Rebekah, and she became his wife; (3) and he loved her . . . (24:67)

The love came last. I know this is not a popular thing to say, but I believe it is true. What I feel for my wife is not what I felt for her 33 years ago. I thought I loved her then. I guess I did love her. But 60,000 dirty diapers and 27 cars and 13 homes and 24 vacuum cleaners have shown me what love really means. What I felt then and what I feel now are perhaps the same thing, but they are not the same amount. If my love was water, 33 years ago it would have been a puddle. Today it is the Pacific Ocean.

2. ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT TO JACOB.

Rebekah was without children for the first 20 years of her marriage (see Gen. 25:20,26). But her husband prayed for her (and blessed her?) and she conceived. Something about the pregnancy troubled her and she prayed to understand.

And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger (Gen 25:23).

Rebekah knew something about her sons that even her husband seemed not to know. The younger of the two would preside. One would think she would have told him. Perhaps she did but he did not listen to his wife. What a mistake that would be, for all of us.

These two sons were men of different interests. There is nothing wrong with that. But there was something wrong with Esau's attitude about spiritual things. His willingness to give up the birthright responsibilities and opportunities for a bowl of red pottage (25:30), and the announcement that "Esau despised his birthright" (25:34) show us quite clearly why the Lord had determined before the birth of the twins that the birthright should go to Jacob. At least he *wanted it*.

Rebekah made preparations to insure that Jacob got the birthright blessing. It seems that she was not sure the Lord could handle it himself. However, the blessing that came to Jacob from Isaac was reiterated by the Lord (see Gen. 28:10-15).

When Esau was 40 (the age at which his father married) he took matters into his own hands and married two wives. Neither were of the covenant, and they were therefore “a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah” (26:34,35), both of whom knew from personal experience the power and blessings of the covenant. (Esau would later take a wife from the descendants of Abraham. The account is in Gen. 28:8,9).

3. JACOB MARRIES LEAH AND RACHEL IN THE COVENANT, AND THROUGH HIM THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT CONTINUES.

Rebekah spoke to her husband about the marriage of her sons.

I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these which are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me? (Gen. 27:46)

Jacob was therefore sent to Haran to find a wife worthy of the covenant. Jacob journeyed where his grandfather's servant had journeyed before, and joined himself to Laban, the brother of his mother. In the course of 20 years (see Gen. 31:41), Jacob married four wives and had 11 sons and at least one daughter. Benjamin, the 12th son, would be born after the return of Jacob to his home.

CONCLUSION:

Two: family. Every normal young man desires a wife. Every normal young woman desires a husband. Be worthy of the mate you choose. Respect him or her. Give encouragement to him or her. Love your companion with all your heart. *This will be the most important decision of your life, the individual whom you marry.*

There is no substitute for marrying in the temple. It is the only place under the heavens where marriage can be solemnized for eternity. Don't cheat yourself. Don't cheat your companion. Don't shortchange your lives. Marry the right person in the right place at the right time (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Life's Obligations," Ensign, Feb. 1999, 2, emphasis added).

Proper marriage is life's most important decision. I know you believe that. I believe it too. I met my wife in High School. I do not remember her, but she says she remembers me. I have occasionally reflected on the remarkable fact that I must have passed my wife hundreds of times in the halls and on the grounds of Logan High without knowing . . . I wrote a poem to her about it.

I now suppose creation
Froze
Each time I met you there,
And growing things
Stopped growing
As I passed by
Unaware.

And mighty suns fell soundlessly,
In grief
That I could pass
Unseeing,
By eternity,
To be on time to class.
—by Ted L. Gibbons., 1969

I pray that none of us will pass unseeing by eternity for any reason.

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