

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

KNOWING GOD'S GUIDANCE (Especially in Choosing A Mate)

Genesis 24:1-67

By

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 48

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Genesis 24:1-67

A flight attendant spent a week's vacation in the Rockies. She was captivated by the mountain peaks, the clear blue skies, and the sweet smelling pines. But she also was charmed by a very eligible bachelor who owned and operated a cattle ranch and lived in a log cabin. At the end of this week, Mr. Wonderful proposed. But it had all happened so quickly that the woman decided to return home and to her job, feeling that she would somehow be guided.

The next day, in flight, she found herself wondering what to do. To perk up, she stopped in the rest room and splashed some cool water on her face. There was some turbulence and a sign lit up: PLEASE RETURN TO THE CABIN. She did--to the cabin back in the mountains (*Reader's Digest* [1/81], p. 118)!

I don't recommend that method! But many Christians wonder, How can I know God's guidance, especially in the crucial decision of whom I should marry? Our text speaks to this issue. Genesis 24 is the longest chapter in Genesis, but since it is a unit, it's tough to break it down into several messages. We could treat the whole from several angles. We could learn about serving the Lord from the fine example of Abraham's servant. We could learn about faith and service from Rebekah. We could study the chapter as an illustration of God the Father (Abraham) sending the Holy Spirit (the servant) to seek a bride (Rebekah = the church) for His Son (Isaac) who had just been through death and resurrection (chapter 22).

But I'm going to approach the text by gleaning some principles of divine guidance. Since it deals with God's guidance as it pertains to finding a mate, I'm going to apply it that way. If you're already married, please don't decide that you made a mistake in discerning God's will in your marriage and decide to try again! You can apply the principles to other areas of guidance.

Moses wrote Genesis to a people who were poised to conquer the land of Canaan which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. They were a rebellious bunch who were not inclined to endure the hardship necessary to fulfill God's purpose. They put comfort for themselves ahead of obedience to God's will. The point of this story in its context is to show Israel the importance of maintaining their purity as God's people when they entered Canaan. They must not forget God's purpose to give them that land and they must not intermarry with the corrupt people there. If they would obey God and commit themselves to His purpose, He would faithfully guide them and provide for them, just as He providentially led Abraham's servant to Rebekah as a wife for Isaac.

If you're single, it's crucial to seek God's guidance and to obey Him in choosing a mate, because except for trusting Christ as Savior, whom you marry is the most important decision you'll make in life. The overall principle of our text is that

God will guide us when we walk with Him
and are committed to His purpose.

Under that overall theme, I want to give five principles on how to know God's guidance. These are not comprehensive and they are not a formula to plug into your computer. But I think they will help.

1. To know God's guidance we must be unswerving in our commitment to God and His purpose.

Both Abraham and his servant had an unswerving commitment to the Lord and His purpose concerning the land of Canaan. Abraham calls his unnamed servant and commissions him to find a wife for Isaac, but not from among the Canaanites. The servant asks a practical question: "Suppose the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?" (24:5). Abraham strongly warns him against doing that and repeats God's call and promise to give him the land of Canaan. So the servant swears to do what Abraham has said (24:6-9).

To know God's guidance we must put aside our own will and seek the will of the God who has called us. That is the basic princi-

ple in determining the will of God in any situation--to empty yourself, as much as you are able, of your own will and to commit yourself to seeking and obeying God's will. As you seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, He will reveal the specific steps you need to take as you need to know them. But if you claim to want to know God's will, but you're not willing to do it unless it agrees with your will, you're kidding yourself. All you really want is God's approval of your plans. But you'll never know God's direction that way. God reveals His will to those who are committed to doing it.

Often it is more difficult to go this route than it is to operate on the basis of human wisdom. For Abraham's servant, it meant a 500-mile journey across difficult terrain. It involved a lot of planning, expense, and hassle. "Why be so fanatical about this, Abraham? Surely there are some nice girls somewhere in Canaan!" But Abraham saw that it was crucial for his son to marry a woman who would share his commitment to the Lord and His purpose concerning the land.

Seeking first God's kingdom is the primary factor in finding the right marriage partner. If you're committed to doing what God wants, He will give you a partner who wants to do His will as you wait on Him. That unity of purpose builds unity in marriage, as the two of you work together in serving the Lord.

But be forewarned! Just as it was more of a hassle for Abraham to secure a wife for Isaac from his own people rather than from the Canaanites, so it will be more difficult for you to find a mate who is committed to God's purpose. Let's face it, there are a lot of nice, good-looking single pagans out there. And there are a fair amount of nice, good-looking church-goers who are living for themselves, not for Christ. But it can be pretty slim pickin's to find a nice, good-looking (there's nothing wrong with good looks--Rebekah is described as "very beautiful" [v. 16]), *godly* single person. And as you watch other Christian singles marrying those who aren't so committed to the Lord, it's easy to begin thinking, "Maybe I'm being too rigid. Maybe there are some nice Canaanite girls (or guys) around." But if you want God's guidance for a marriage partner, you must be unswerving in your commitment to God and His purpose.

2. To know God's guidance we must move out in obedience accompanied by common sense.

Abraham's servant didn't sit in his tent praying for a wife for Isaac. He prayed a lot, but when Abraham told him to go to Haran and find a wife for Isaac, he arose and went (24:10). He moved out in obedience and he used common sense by taking the gifts needed to secure a bride in that culture.

Sometimes we get super-spiritual about this matter of determining God's will, especially as it pertains to finding a mate. In college I heard speakers say that we should just trust God for a wife. I felt like if I went to a Christian gathering to look for a Christian girl to date, I was really carnal! I bought that for a while. But I remember one time after I hadn't had a date for about two years, I was on my knees pleading with God for a wife when I realized that He wasn't going to bring her floating through the window like the old Hertz rent-a-car ads. The Lord was saying to me, "At least go where there are some prospects!"

That's what Abraham's servant did. He didn't start hanging out at the local bars or discos in Canaan. He went where he could find a godly young woman from Abraham's relatives, as Abraham had told him to do. So obey God and use the common sense He gave you. You won't find a godly mate in bars. Don't go there! You may find a godly mate at church. Go there! That's not super-spiritual. But I think it's biblical!

3. To know God's guidance we must seek and expect it, while submitting to His sovereign ways.

Abraham told his servant that he could expect God's angel to go before him and lead him to the right young woman for Isaac (24:7). So the servant went in obedience, called to God for guidance, and God gave it to him (24:11-14).

So often we don't experience God's guidance because we get so caught up doing our own thing that we fail to stop and ask God to reveal His will to us. Or we get into our established routine, and it takes a catastrophe for God to get our attention so He can let us know what He wants us to do. So if you want God's guidance, stop and ask Him for it, expect Him to give it, and wait long enough to

listen to what He might have to say. "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14).

But what if God doesn't say anything? Maybe you're waiting for the wrong kind of communication. Note here that there was no voice from heaven, no miracle, no visible angel, no display of God's glory, no sign in the sky. In fact, there was no guarantee of success. Both Abraham and the servant recognized that they might not succeed (24:5, 8, 49, 58). So how did he know what God's will was in this situation?

The answer is that when you seek and expect God's guidance, and remain submissive to God's sovereign ways, He providentially orchestrates circumstances in such a way as to confirm His will. Before the servant was done praying, God brought Rebekah along and the circumstances fit together in such an unmistakable way that the servant knew God had led him.

You need to be aware that God's providential ordering of circumstances does not always work out in storybook fashion with a happy ending. Sometimes He providentially leads you into a relationship where you get your heart broken. I went through two major and one minor heartbreak romances before the Lord led me to Marla. While such experiences are not fun, the Lord does have important lessons to teach you if you submit to His sovereign ways. But if you think, "I trusted God and got burned, so I'm going to take matters in my own hands," you're not going to know His guidance. You'll only bring more pain and discipline into your life.

In the case of Abraham's servant, God did confirm His will through the circumstances. But however it works out, to experience God's guidance, we must seek and expect it, while submitting to His sovereign ways.

4. To know God's guidance we must apply God's wisdom.

Some think that Abraham's servant was putting out a fleece when he laid out the terms of how he would know which young woman was right for Isaac (24:14). But there's a big difference between what he did and what Gideon did in putting out his fleece. God had clearly told Gideon what His will was; the fleece was Gideon's way of catering to his weak faith. God graciously consented to it, but it's not a model for determining God's will.

But here, the servant wasn't dictating to God what to do or doubting what God had already made clear. Rather, he was trying to provide a basis upon which he could know that his prayer had been answered. The test he proposed shows that he was applying God's wisdom to this situation.

It would have been customary for any young woman to have given a stranger a drink. But to draw water for ten thirsty camels, each of which could drink about 20 gallons, and to do so without being asked, required a woman who was not self-centered, but who had a servant's heart. Since self-centeredness is the root of most marriage conflicts, the servant was going to the very heart of what Isaac needed in a bride to have a happy home life. He applied God's wisdom in seeking God's will.

Note how Rebekah's normal thoughtfulness and willingness to serve paid off for her. She didn't know who this stranger was. She wasn't putting on her best "date" behavior to impress him. She was simply living as she always did, thinking of the needs of others and giving herself to meet those needs. God used that to make her the wife of Isaac, the mother of Israel (Jacob).

Note four aspects of God's wisdom for the choice of a mate:

1) *Look for godly character qualities above all else in a prospective mate.* Beauty is okay (24:16), but godliness is essential. Especially look for someone who denies self and is focused on loving God and others. Look for a person who bases his or her life on obedience to God's Word, who is growing in the fruit of the Spirit. If you marry a beautiful woman who is focused on herself or a hunk who thinks the world revolves around him, you're in for a miserable ride in marriage!

2) *Finding the right person depends on being the right person.* Because Rebekah had a servant's heart, she found Isaac. If she had thought, "Who is this old man asking me for water?" and had gone on her way, she wouldn't have met Isaac. You've got to be the kind of person the kind of person you want to marry would want to marry. If you want a kind, loving, godly mate, you've got to become a kind, loving, godly person.

3) *Seek the wisdom of your parents.* You probably didn't want to hear that! But it's an unmistakable principle in the Bible. Abraham,

through his servant, picked Isaac's wife. Although Rebekah had some say in the matter, it was her parents who really approved it. Even though we don't have our parents arrange our marriages, we still need to listen to their counsel. If your parents are not believers, their counsel may not be as valid as that of godly parents. But if your parents have a strong objection to your fiancé, you need to listen to them and think carefully about what they say. They often have wisdom you lack, especially when you're in the passion of romantic love.

4) Marriage is the foundation for love; love is not the foundation for marriage. Isaac and Rebekah married; then we read that Isaac loved her (24:67). Don't misunderstand; I believe in romantic love. But if you build a marriage on romantic love, what do you do if conflicts develop and you don't feel in love any more? But if you build love on the foundation of the marriage commitment, then you can weather the inevitable storms. In the Bible, we are commanded to love our mates whether we feel in love or not; the feelings follow if we obey.

To know God's guidance we must: (1) Be unswerving in our commitment to God and His purpose. (2) Move out in obedience accompanied by common sense. (3) Seek and expect it, while submitting to His sovereign ways. (4) Apply God's wisdom. Finally,

5. To know God's guidance we must bathe the whole process in prayer and constant fellowship with God.

The servant didn't meet Rebekah and say, "You're Rebekah? No kidding! What a coincidence! This must be my lucky day!" He knew it wasn't luck because he had sought the Lord in prayer. I think Abraham and Isaac were praying, too (see v. 63). The story reveals that this servant walked in fellowship with God. So when God worked the circumstances out, he worshiped the Lord and then was careful to tell Rebekah and her family the whole story of how God had led him. When he got done and asked whether they would permit Rebekah to go with him, they could only answer, "The matter is from the Lord; what can we say? ... Take her and go ... as the Lord has spoken." (24:51-52).

The longer I'm a Christian, the more I believe that finding God's will isn't a matter of some formula. It's a matter of walking in constant fellowship with the Lord, taking everything to Him in

prayer. When you know that prayer is behind your circumstances, then that which otherwise may seem to be a coincidence turns out not to be a coincidence at all. Your steps are ordered by the Lord. When you walk with Him and are committed to His purpose, He will work quietly behind the scenes of your life, leading you through potential hazards, not always leading as you might have hoped, but still leading, putting all the pieces together. The process becomes a beautiful blending of God's faithfulness and sovereignty and of our obedient trust in Him.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude by telling you how God led me to Marla. After my third brokenhearted romance, I was more lonely than I had ever been. I spent a lot of time crying out to the Lord for His provision for a wife. One time several months after the third relationship had ended, that girl called me to ask my counsel on an important matter and to share her own confusion about God's will for herself concerning marriage. I hung up the phone and fasted and prayed for three days, entreating the Lord to give her to me for my wife. But He didn't seem to hear me.

Some time before that, my former roommate had been hiking in the local mountains. He told me that he had met three Christian girls. A few weeks later, Mark, a mutual friend of ours, started dating a girl, and when he showed my roommate her picture, he said, "That's one of the girls I met hiking!" Mark's girlfriend roomed with another of those three girls, and he lined me up on a blind date with her. She was a nice girl, but she wasn't my type.

Then Mark and some of my friends met the third girl. They all told me that she was my type. Mark asked if he could set me up with her. I said no, it wouldn't be cool after dating her friend. But he kept pestering me. Finally, I said, "Okay, set up something where she will be there, and I'll show up." He called back and said, "It's on for Saturday night." Out of duty I went and met Marla. I thought, "She's kind of nice." So I didn't mess around--I asked her out for the next night. After that night I thought, "I like her!" And she even seemed to like me! Glory! We saw a lot of each other that week and by the end of the week we knew that we wanted to get married. We spent almost every waking moment together, and in less than three months we were married. It was kind of like Heze-

kiah's revival, where the people rejoiced over what God had done, "because the thing came about suddenly" (2 Chron. 29:36). I've been rejoicing for almost 23 years now!

It might not work out quite like that for you. But if you'll "trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" and "in all your ways acknowledge Him," then "He will direct your paths" for His glory and for your good. Walk daily with Him; be committed to His purpose. He will guide you in all your ways.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most difficult aspect for you in determining God's will?
2. Why doesn't God normally speak to us in an audible voice? Why is determining His will so vague and subjective at times?
3. Does God's will contradict common sense: Usually; Often; Seldom; Never? Discuss.
4. Have we overemphasized the role of romantic love in choosing a mate? How should it be any different?
5. What is right (if anything) and wrong with the American way of dating in looking for a mate?

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