

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Rebekah Isaac's wife**

#### **Lesson 1: Rebekah's arranged betrothal**

##### **Reading: Genesis 24:1-60**

This is a wonderful story of God's grace, provision and guidance.

Abraham had become exceedingly rich with flocks of sheep, herds of cattle, camels and donkeys. He also possessed huge amounts of gold and silver, and all the servants he required.

Abraham sent his and Hagar's son, Ishmael, away shortly after Isaac was born so that only Isaac would receive the inheritance.

After Sarah died and when Abraham was approaching the end of his life, he was determined that Isaac should marry one of Abraham's relatives, rather than one of the local Canaanite girls. Wanting to see Isaac appropriately married prior to his departure from earth, Abraham called his chief servant, Eliezer, and made him swear on oath that he would find a bride for Isaac from amongst Abraham's extended family.

It was a huge commitment for Eliezer to make and so he debated the whole issue with Abraham. The last thing Eliezer wanted was to be burdened with searching fruitlessly for a wife for Isaac. He was afraid he might indeed find the right girl but she might still refuse to accompany him back to Isaac.

Abraham confirmed to Eliezer that if the girl he found should refuse to join him, then Eliezer would be released from his oath. However, under no circumstances was Eliezer to bring back a Canaanite girl or take Isaac away from where they were living.

Suitably reassured, Eliezer loaded his camels with everything required for the journey, including gifts for the girl and her family.

I love the simplicity of Eliezer's faith. He went in obedience to his master's directions and then engaged God in the proposed adventure. He might not have wanted to admit his own faith in God so he prayed to his master's God! And yet the simplicity of his prayer and its practical application suggests that Eliezer enjoyed an intimate relationship with Abraham's God.

Eliezer's prayer did not focus on his own dilemma but sought the goodness of God, on behalf of Abraham. This suggests that Abraham and Eliezer had a deeper relationship than that of master and slave. After all, Abraham entrusted Eliezer with the most important mission of his life – Abraham's total future currently rested upon Eliezer's shoulders.

So Eliezer prayed a prayer seeking God's guidance. He prayed that should a girl he asked for water not only gave him a drink but also watered his camels, then he would know that she was the girl for Isaac. God is a good God, a God of mercy and grace – He already knew about Eliezer's mission and arranged that Rebekah would approach Eliezer even before Eliezer had finished praying.

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Eliezer asked Rebekah for a drink. She obliged and additionally offered to water his camels. We need to remember that camels are thirsty drinkers and can consume many litres of water. However, Rebekah was more than willing to see their thirst quenched.

Eliezer was overwhelmed and when he discovered her close relationship with Abraham, he exploded with gratitude to God. He gave Rebekah gifts and then asked to stay the night. Rebekah ran home with the news, and her brother, Laban, greeted Eliezer and welcomed him to their home.

However, before Eliezer joined them in the feast, he explained the purpose of his visit and shared how God had answered his prayer. Laban and his mother readily agreed to the marriage proposal and suggested the following morning that Eliezer and Rebekah should set out after a couple of weeks. Eliezer was obviously a task-focused person and countered that he wanted to leave immediately. At that point, Rebekah was finally invited to discuss the arrangements. She agreed to Eliezer's request, and following her family's blessing, she set off to meet her husband to be, accompanied by her maid, Deborah.

### **Rebekah would say to us today...**

It always pays dividends to go the 'extra mile'. God is watching our lives and so nothing is ever wasted. Yes, mine was an arranged marriage, however, I think it was arranged in Heaven before it was arranged on earth. Every marriage should be an arranged marriage in Heaven. Then you can know with confidence that it will withstand all the challenges of life.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I am so glad that You instituted the covenant of marriage. Please help us regain the sanctity and blessing of marriage for our country and community. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Ruth 3
- Hosea 1:2-11
- Ephesians 5:25-33
- Revelation 21:1-7

### **Questions**

1. What are the potential risks of an arranged marriage?
2. What are the potential blessings of an arranged marriage?
3. How does God liken marriage to our relationship with Christ Jesus?

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### **Lesson 2: Rebekah's simple wedding**

#### **Reading: Genesis 24:61-66**

Rebekah was an amazing girl. Her destiny was chosen for her by her mother and brother, in response to a proposal from Abraham's servant, Eliezer. She appears to have had no say in the arrangement whatsoever.

Indeed, Rebekah didn't seem to be a part of the discussion, until she was given the option of either staying a further couple of weeks or leaving home immediately. Once she was included in the discussion, however, her reply was brief. *"I will go (at once)."*

No doubt, with Rebekah being a lady, it must have taken her a few 'minutes' to powder her face, put on her make-up, comb her hair, do her toenails and pack her suitcase (and cuddly toy), and apart from that and waiting for her maid to ready herself while making sure they had everything they could possibly need for their journey, they left immediately.

I'm sure Eliezer was ecstatic and very relieved to be back on the road, having had his major challenge and headache sorted. I wonder if Eliezer kept looking back over his shoulder, wondering if Laban and his servants would come charging after him, with a change of mind, and wanting Rebekah back. (Fortunately for Eliezer, this took place well before Jacob was born or thought of).

Whilst Eliezer, Rebekah and their camel caravan were travelling towards Abraham's spread, Isaac was also riding back towards home. As evening approached, Isaac dismounted and sat down to enjoy the cool of the day and spend it in solitary contemplation.

After a while, however, Isaac looked up and saw a camel caravan drawing near. I'm sure that, at the sight of the caravan, his heart must have missed a beat or two as he contemplated who was in it and whether it was bearing his potential bride.

I wonder what thoughts flooded into his mind. Excitement at the prospect of a new life? Fear that he wouldn't like or be attracted to the girl? Or indeed whether she would take one look at him and demand to be taken back home? Would Isaac be wondering if Rebekah would dominate his life or complement it? Would he be questioning whether life would be easier with her or without her? Would she be like Sarah, his mother? What would Abraham think of her – would he approve and bless their marriage or just go through the motions, glad, at least, that Isaac was married?

At exactly the same moment, Rebekah saw someone sitting in the grass. She dismounted her camel and asked Eliezer who it was. Eliezer replied that it was Isaac (Eliezer's master). Hearing that it was Isaac, Rebekah immediately threw a veil over her face in modesty.

I wonder what questions were being posed in Rebekah's mind? What would Isaac be like? Rich and arrogant or wealthy and gracious? Someone who was used to getting his own way, regardless of what others said and thought, or someone who would discuss their present and future dreams?

Once they had dispensed their greetings, Eliezer told Isaac everything that had occurred. Upon reaching their camp, Isaac took Rebekah's hand and led her into his mother Sarah's tent. Isaac married Rebekah there and then. Rebekah thus became Isaac's wife and he fell in love with her. It seems Rebekah fell in love with Isaac, too.

The Bible adds that Isaac was finally comforted after his mother's death when he married

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Rebekah. There can be no doubt that both Abraham and Sarah doted on their miracle son, and I'm sure Isaac loved every minute of it. He would have been 'spoilt' as an only son could be, so when his mother died, Isaac would have mourned the loss of his mother very deeply. Maybe that was another reason for Abraham choosing this point in time to go and find Isaac a good wife, in order to try and assuage his grief.

Rebekah was definitely the right solution.

### **Rebekah would say to us today...**

Weddings don't have to be financially expensive or extravagant. What matters is whether the two people enter a covenant relationship of love. No matter how much it costs – God is present and can be present in the marriage for your entire lifetime together.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank you so much that You are a covenant keeping God. Thank You for giving us the example of marriage to show Your unconditional love and commitment to us. Please help us to always honour our wedding vows. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 2: 18-25
- Ruth 4:1-12
- Matthew 1:18-25

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think that those who spend the most on weddings often end up with the shortest marriage?
2. What are the most significant issues behind the wedding day arrangements?
3. What can be done to help marriages last longer?

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### **Lesson 3: Rebekah, the mother of twins**

#### **Reading: Genesis 25:19-34**

After Isaac married Rebekah, Abraham seemed to take on a whole new lease of life. He married Keturah and had another six sons. In total, Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Ishmael and Isaac buried Abraham in the same cave where Sarah was buried.

Isaac and Rebekah became aware that Rebekah was barren. Barrenness was a terrible stigma and an embarrassment to both the wife and husband. So Isaac began praying for Rebekah to be healed. We don't know when Isaac started praying for Rebekah. All we do know is that she was barren for nearly twenty years, since Isaac was forty when they got married and sixty when the twins were born.

It must have been a very hard twenty years. Let's consider the scene. Isaac and Rebekah had an arranged marriage that turned out to be infertile. Just imagine the pressure on their minds. They might have questioned the wisdom of their marriage and the possibility of dissolving the marriage because of infertility. Or considered the alternative option taken by Isaac's parents when they used Hagar to fill the gap.

I wonder if they ever had discussions about using Deborah to stand in as the proxy mother of Isaac's children. History suggests that they had either learned the dangers of such a relationship or they were simply holding onto their faith that God would eventually answer their prayers.

Holding on to hope and faith in the face of day-to-day disappointment is very wearing and demotivating and yet we don't read that Isaac or Rebekah had allowed those emotions to discourage them. They just kept on living one day at a time, believing God would come good in the end. Which God did.

When Rebekah eventually became pregnant, she must have wondered what on earth was going on in her womb. The discomfort was so intense that she cried out to God for an answer. The Lord replied that there were two babies representing two nations in her womb and that they would go their separate ways. God also pointed out that one would be stronger than the other, and that the older child would serve the younger one.

Rebekah must have felt that the babies were trying to establish their pecking order whilst still within her womb. Indeed, why shouldn't they settle their differences as soon as they could?

The twins were by no means the gorgeous identical twins that we see so many of today. No way. These two were as different as chalk is from cheese. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how they could have been more different, given they both had the same parents. The first turned out to be covered in red hair all over his body, just like the skin of an animal, whereas the second boy's skin was evidently as smooth as the proverbial baby's bottom.

The other remarkable thing was that whilst the first baby came out ahead of the second, nevertheless, the second baby's hand was grasping the first baby's heel; perhaps he was so eager to come out and establish his ascendancy and superiority. Rebekah, no doubt, remembered what God had told her and waited to see how their lives would unfold towards that destiny.

It didn't take many years for the result of the prophecy to become obvious. Esau, the eldest, became a skilful hunter, whereas Jacob enjoyed staying around the tents of home. Isaac, who

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loved the taste of game, made Esau his favourite son, while Rebekah favoured the home lover, Jacob. However, I suspect she also loved Jacob more because of what the Lord had revealed to her. I'm sure that coloured her judgment even more.

The difference between the two boys was revealed again when Esau requested some stew off Jacob and Jacob demanded Esau's birthright in payment. Instead of Esau calming down and thinking through the serious ramifications of this transaction, he just foolishly gave away the birthright that was his as the eldest son.

### **Rebekah would say to us today...**

Both Isaac and I were wrong to show favouritism to our children and it was even worse that we were in competition with each other. This was because the Lord told me when the boys were born that the older would serve the younger.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for treating us all as Your children, with mercy, grace and love. Please help us to love and treat our children in a similar way. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 37:1-4
- Proverbs 22:6
- Deuteronomy 6:1-9

### **Questions**

1. Why is it so easy to have favourites?
2. What are the most important characteristics we need to recognise in our children?
3. Have you discovered the personality traits of your children? (You will find it very enlightening.)

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### **Lesson 4: Rebekah mistreated by Isaac**

**Reading: Genesis: 26:1-16**

Isaac committed the same sin as his father.

Years earlier, before Isaac was born, Abraham moved into Gerar, which is a part of Philistine territory. Abraham was both fearful and suspicious of the Philistines. He was convinced that if he let people know Sarah was his wife, particularly on account of her beauty, they would kill him and take his wife, Sarah, for themselves. When Abraham told the Philistines that Sarah was his sister, they let Abraham live but took Sarah away.

However, because of God's grace and intervention no harm befell Sarah. God appeared to their king, Abimelech, and threatened to kill him for taking Sarah. Abimelech protested his innocence, pleading he had no idea Sarah was Abraham's wife since Abraham had introduced her as his sister. God replied that He had kept Abimelech from touching her because Abimelech had acted in ignorance. Nevertheless, Abimelech had to go and seek Abraham's forgiveness.

Whether Isaac was ever told about this escapade or not, he followed in his father's footsteps.

There was a famine in the land, and Isaac and Rebekah moved into the same Philistine territory. God told Isaac to stay there and that He would reaffirm the promise and covenant He made with Abraham. Isaac would be blessed by God and become the father of many multitudes. Furthermore, Isaac would be given the land he was now living in. God also reminded Isaac that he had been blessed so that God could use him and his descendants to bless all the nations on earth.

Despite God's assurance of blessing and protection through His presence being with Isaac at all times, Isaac, like Abraham before him, told the local people that Rebekah was his sister. He thought, just like his father did, that because Rebekah was so beautiful, the people would kill him and take his wife away.

This time, however, the Philistines left both Isaac and Rebekah alone and I'm sure Isaac began to relax. Isaac was, undoubtedly, still very much in love with Rebekah, and he relaxed his guard so much that he began to caress her. Isaac put his arm around Rebekah and then placed his hand under her breast. Whilst that was completely natural behaviour for a husband, it was not the sort of thing you would do to your sister.

And, of course, it so happened that King Abimelech looked out of his balcony window at just that moment. Abimelech was furious and summoned Isaac to come and see him. Abimelech challenged Isaac to explain himself. Why had he tried to conceal the fact from everyone that Rebekah was his wife? Coily, Isaac had to confess his deception and explain how he was afraid he would be killed had he owned up to the fact that he was married to Rebekah.

Abimelech was very unimpressed. He reprimanded Isaac, explaining to him that because of his stupidity, any one of the Philistine men could have taken Rebekah and had sex with her, not knowing that she was married. Abimelech was distraught because, had that happened, they would all have borne the guilt through no real fault of their own.

Luckily for Isaac, rather than killing him on the spot, Abimelech issued orders that none of his people could molest Isaac or Rebekah in any way or the penalty would be death.

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It is important for us to notice that in both circumstances God prospered Abraham and Isaac, even though they had been deceptive to the Philistines and callous to their wives. God showed that He is a God of mercy, grace and blessing, which He gave freely to Abraham and Isaac. They deserved to be killed and yet God forgave them and blessed them abundantly.

He can do the same for you. Our salvation is not up to us; it is entirely through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Rebekah would say to us today...**

I honoured my husband and agreed to the humiliation for the sake of his safety and well-being. I didn't like it and I certainly didn't appreciate it. However, the Lord protected my integrity and kept us safe. We can all trust God when we submit to Him in every area of our lives.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to always treat my spouse with love, courtesy and kindness. Please guard me from taking them for granted and treating them in a self-centred way. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 20:1-18
- 1 Samuel 25:1-42
- Ephesians 5:22-31

### **Questions**

1. Why is it so easy to take our spouse for granted?
2. What are the areas in your marriage where you need to give extra grace?
3. How do you deal with disappointment with your spouse?



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### **Lesson 5: Rebekah, the scheming mother**

#### **Reading: Genesis 27:1-29**

I love the fact that whenever I read the scriptures I invariably 'see' something I have not noticed before. I don't know how many times I have read these events – yet, in preparing to write this study, I began by reading the previous chapter and the last two verses jumped out from the page.

The chapter described that when Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, a Canaanite girl, and the marriage became a terrible source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. The first thing that grabbed my attention was that, contrary to my assumption, Esau and Jacob were not young men when Isaac chose to bless them. They were both fully-grown and independent men. Esau was already married.

The second point that hit me like a brick was that Esau had once more shown, by his actions, how inappropriate it was for him to receive the patriarchal blessing at Jacob's expense. Esau had disqualified himself over selling his birthright for a cup of stew and further incensed his parent by marrying a godless foreigner. Knowing this background brings, for me at least, a whole new perspective to our reading.

Isaac had become blind and felt that his time on earth was coming to an end. However, before he departed, he wanted to pass on the patriarchal blessing and so called his eldest over to see him and explained to Esau that he was old and likely to die any day. Consequently, Isaac was keen to enjoy at least one last special meal. Isaac loved the taste of game and so, as Esau was the family hunter, asked Esau to go and kill an animal and cook it up especially for him. Isaac told Esau that, upon Esau's return, Isaac would give Esau his blessing prior to his death.

As Esau left on his hunting trip, Rebekah, who had overheard the conversation, went into feverish action. She knew that Isaac was going to give away the family blessing and was determined that her Jacob would be the sole beneficiary. Rebekah called Jacob to her side and explained her plan.

Jacob sounded very dubious. How could Isaac not detect the deception? Esau was renowned as extremely hairy, whereas Jacob was as smooth as snow. Rebekah had already thought that one out. First, she asked Jacob to go out into the fields and bring her a couple of their best goats. Then Rebekah took the goat meat and specially prepared it so that Isaac would not be able to detect the difference.

Jacob was concerned that if Isaac found him out, he would end up being cursed rather than blessed. Undeterred, Rebekah brought Jacob some of Esau's clothes and told Jacob to put them on. Then Rebekah took some of the goatskins and covered Jacob's hands and neck. Once she was satisfied that the deception was complete, Rebekah handed Jacob the special food and bread that she had prepared.

Jacob took it and entered Isaac's room, and greeted his father. Because Isaac was expecting Esau and he detected a change in the voice, Isaac asked for verification. Jacob replied that he was Esau and that he had gone out and produced the meal Isaac had asked for. Jacob must have been shocked when Isaac asked him why his hunting had been so successful. Jacob lied that God had helped him.

Isaac called Jacob to draw closer to him. He then felt Jacob's hands. Isaac expressed confusion and said the voice was that of Jacob but the hands were Esau's. Jacob continued the deceit by

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claiming to be his brother. Isaac then gave Jacob the patriarchal blessing and withdrew himself.

Shortly afterwards Esau arrived and tried to get a blessing from Isaac. Isaac was horrified as he had already blessed Jacob and given everything to him. Rebekah's plan had succeeded.

### **Rebekah would say to us today...**

You need to understand the significance of the patriarchal blessing. Had Isaac blessed Esau instead of Jacob, Jacob would have received nothing. I could not stand by and let that happen, particularly after knowing what the Lord had revealed to me when the boys were still in my womb. History justifies my actions.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for recording the results of Rebekah's trickery. Thank You for showing us the difference between Esau and Jacob's characters and thank You for choosing Jacob to become Israel. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 38:6-30
- Exodus 2:1-10
- 1 Samuel 1:1-20

### **Questions**

1. Why did God allow Rebekah's scheme to succeed?
2. What were Esau's character flaws?
3. Why did God say He loved Jacob but hated Esau (Romans 9: 13)?