Community Messages From Genesis 9/3/23

“Choosing a Spouse”

One of the most beautiful stories in the Bible is found in Genesis 24. Abraham is nearing the end of his life. Sarah has already dead. It's time to find a wife for his son Isaac.

Abraham’s most trusted servant is sent back to Abraham’s homeland to find a wife for Isaac there. The servant makes the trip, and one evening by a well outside the city of Nahor, the servant prays, and suggests a sign by which he will know what girl is the one God has chosen for Isaac. "And he said, 'O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water.  Let the young woman to whom I shall say, "Please offer your jar that I may drink," and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master"” (Genesis 24:12-14).

No sooner has he prayed, than Rebekah comes, and in the hospitality and kindness she shows, the servant realizes that she is the one to be Isaac’s wife. The girl’s mother and brother Laban give permission, and she herself agrees to go back with the servant and become Isaac’s bride.

When I counsel a couple before marriage, I usually begin by asking how they met and how they came to fall in love with each other. Often their stories are interesting, sometimes humorous.

What a story Isaac and Rebekah had to tell! In a matter of a day or so, the marriage had been agreed upon!

Several of the most important decisions we have to make in life are whether or not we will marry; and if we marry, the choice we make of a partner.

As we've just seen in Genesis 24, marriage customs in the time of Isaac and Rebekah were much different than they are today in the United States! *Marriages were arranged by the parents.* In this case, Abraham set the guidelines; and Rebekah’s father and brother had a say. Of course, this is not the way we do it here in the U.S. - although in some cultures, marriages are still arranged by parents.

I can imagine Isaac, out in the field, seeing the servant returning home with his bride-to-be…stopping what he’s doing… straining to get a glimpse of her! What does she look like? Is she pretty? Rebekah covers her face with a veil – that doesn’t help! Gordon Mote is an incredibly gifted pianist and song writer. Gordon was born blind. I remember him talking about his marriage, and asking his mother about his wife to be: "Is she pretty?" Not only was Isaac no doubt wondering that, but I can imagine Rebekah trying to get a glimpse of her future husband!

Most of us think, “Good grief, I wouldn’t want that kind of arrangement for marrying someone! I like being able to pick my future husband or wife!” Me too! But with about half of couples who get married today eventually divorcing, I’m not sure our method is working that well!

A noted marriage counselor once asked a group of young people in India if they wouldn’t rather choose their own marriage partners as we do in the Western world. They said “No.” When he asked them why, they said they were too inexperienced to make such an important choice!

Now I'm not suggesting that we ought to change our customs and have marriages arranged by parents here in the U.S.! This isn’t going to happen anyway! But sometimes the choices we make in a partner aren’t very wise or informed! For instance, there are situations where one falls in love with somebody – and family members and friends see in this other person things that the one in love doesn’t see. Maybe the prospective partner is lazy, or tends to lie, or has a temper, or is even abusive – and the person "in love" just doesn’t see that – doesn’t want to hear when family or friends try to point this out. There is some truth in the old adage that “love is blind”.

So, choosing a life partner is an important decision, obviously, and although the story of Isaac and Rebekah comes from a much different time and culture, it gives us some important pointers for the process of choosing a mate.

*For one thing, their decision to marry wasn’t based on feelings alone!* Note verse 67: "Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her." They got married, *then* they fell in love!

Just feeling that you’re in love is not a solid enough reason to get married! We humans have the capacity to “fall in love” with any number of persons! Someone has remarked, “Just because two people are in love doesn’t mean that they should marry. One of them might already be married to someone else. One might be a lazy individual having low ideals and no goals in life, one should perhaps need first to finish education, and one or both might be too young really to be ready for marriage.” Now, obviously, if you feel physically attracted to someone, that’s not a bad place to start! I would *hope* that you feel some attraction toward the person you're going to marry! But we can be attracted to any number of people!

Being "in love” is a matter of physical attraction, sexual attraction, body chemistry. Scientists have done research on the biology and chemistry of love. They have discovered that when a person is romantically attracted to another that their brain is flooded with certain chemicals that are amphetamines – they give us a natural high! So, there is this feeling of being in love, riding on cloud 9! But these highs don’t last forever. They last about 3-4 years. By that time the body builds a tolerance to them – the intense passions sputter out. So, once this romantic euphoria begins to wear off, if you’ve based the marriage *only* on these feelings alone, you’re on shaky ground! So, a key here (and it’s hard to do this when one is caught up in giddy, romantic feelings) is to look at the kind of person this prospective partner is!

Rebekah seemed to be the kind of person who’d make a successful wife! Genesis 24:16 describes her: *“The girl was very fair to look upon.”* She had outward beauty. Naturally, we have little control over how good looking we are, but we can control *how we maintain* our physical appearance. It says *Rebekah was pure.* She was “a virgin, whom no man had known” (vs. 16). It's pretty sad that people almost joke today that someone would be virgin on wedding night. We desperately need young men and women who will covenant with God to keep

themselves sexually pure for their future husband and wife. A famous preacher (I think it was Harry Emerson Fosdick) as a young man, made a covenant with God to keep himself pure for the one whom God would eventually send into his life to be his wife.

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Also, *Rebekah was kind and hospitable.* She was gracious to this stranger, Abraham’s

servant. Is person I want to marry kind, trustworthy, generous, gracious? In the end, these kinds of qualities will go a lot further than mere physical beauty!

Here’s something to remember: Even after we get married, we still can become physically attracted to, or fall in love with, someone other than our husband or wife. David Mace, a marriage counselor and author, notes that getting married doesn’t mean that we no longer feel attracted to someone else, or even have the capacity to fall in love with someone else. These unexpected feelings can come to anyone – even good people – and may surprise and shock a person. The important thing, he says, is *what we do with* these feelings if they come – whether we encourage them and act on them, or whether we simply admit the feelings are there and quietly let them die. This is why an undergirding commitment to our partner and to our marriage vows is so important if we are to weather the storm of our changing feelings!

So, don’t base your choice of a partner on *feelings* alone, or on the giddy experience of being “in love”. The story of Isaac and Rebekah also shows this: *Look for common background and interests.* Abraham made his servant promise by a sacred oath that he would take a wife for Isaac from among his own country and kindred. "I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac”(Genesis 24:3-4). We discover later in the chapter that Rebekah was a daughter of one of Abraham’s relatives. (This isn’t to suggest that we marry Kentucky mountain style – and marry our sister or our cousin!). Rather, before we marry, it's good to ask: Do I have things in common with my prospective husband/wife? Do we have similar social and economic backgrounds? Are our life style and goals in life compatible?

No two people are alike, and differences can enhance a marriage. But if the differences in background…values…life style…are too great, this should be a red flag. Nancy and I have a friend who is a pastor. When we were just starting out our marriage, our friend was still single. He was pastor of a country circuit, small country churches. To be honest, although our friend is a great guy and full of fun, he's not the most handsome guy in town. Somehow he met a very attractive young lady who was a flight attendant. A "jet setter” both figuratively and literally. They had a whirlwind romance, and Nancy and I were kind of shocked when they announced their engagement. We were so happy for Bill, but a little wary of things, since they operated in two very different worlds. Well, their engagement was short-lived. My heart ached for our friend when he quietly confided that she had just casually given the engagement ring back and took off out of his life.

Does a couple have enough in common that when the emotion of the honeymoon and the first year or so wears off, they have enough compatibility to build a life together?

Of course, if you’re a follower of Jesus, it's important to ask whether you and your prospective partner share a common faith and commitment to Christ! This religious or spiritual issue is

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probably part of the reason why Isaac was not to marry a Canaanite woman! The God of Abraham, and the pagan gods of Canaanite women, just didn’t go together!

I think the New Testament is clear that if you’re a committed follower of Jesus, you should not marry a person who is not a believer. 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 says this: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" I’ve known Christians who’ve disregarded this advice. Either they don’t even think about it, or they rationalize: “Well, the person I’m dating isn’t a Christian, but he’s a nice guy…she's a great gal!" “My fiancé isn’t a believer, but we’re very much in love and I think it will all work out." Well, maybe so, maybe not. Many Christians are married to non-Christians. Some have good marriages. But still, there's something missing if you can't sense a spiritual oneness on the deepest level with your partner. I’ve known other Christians who’ve told me frankly that they regret marrying a non-believer, and wish they had considered that before they married this person.

Let me just say, if you're married to a non-believer, perhaps the best advice is to stay with that person, try to be the most loving, caring Christian you can be, and pray that your partner will come to the Lord and be saved.

You’re choosing a mate? Look for someone with whom you have things in common – particularly that this person is a follower of Jesus if *you* are a follower of Jesus.

We're looking at pointers for choosing a husband or wife. Here's another: *Try to hunt in the right place!* Did you notice where Abraham’s servant looked for Isaac’s bride-to-be? The servant sent by Abraham went to a well at the time women went out to draw water! (Genesis 24:11). He was no dummy!

I realize one of the hardest things for many Christian singles is, “Where do I go to meet genuinely Christian men/women?” Unfortunately, churches often are little help. So many congregations have few or no young adults attending. Although, some larger churches have vibrant singles' ministries. I've known Christians who’ve looked for partners in bars – generally not recommended!

A big thing today is meeting other singles through internet dating services. Even *Christian* dating sights. “Christian Mingle”, "Christian Matches", "Upward App", "Christian Café",

"Crosspaths", "Christian Cupid", "Christian Connection", "Catholic Match". So, it's not as difficult today as to find a prospective partner than it was 20 or 30 years ago. This can be a useful dating tool, although since it's the internet, some caution is warranted!

There is one other tip I think we can get from the story of Isaac and Rebekah: *The servant prayed and asked the Lord to lead him.* In Genesis 24:12 the servant's prayer begins: "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my Master Abraham."

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God wants His children to find *believing* partners. God is concerned about His single sons and daughters who are longing to marry. Don’t be afraid to go to God in prayer with your requests and needs!

(Of course, all that I've said in this message not only applies to young adults who've never been married, but to older individuals who may be divorced, or widowed, and open to dating and marrying again.)

Not many people today find their husband or wife the way Isaac did - having their partner picked out through a family servant, by a well, with the choice being made in a day’s time! Actually,

I doubt that many people would *want to* find mate that way!

But some elements of this story in Genesis 24 still remains good advice for today!

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