

READ

Genesis 24

REFLECT

Everyone loves a good romance, though Genesis 24 might be a bit of a letdown if one expected romance from Isaac and Rebekah's wedding. It's entrenched in a vastly different culture with its own understanding of marriage and courtship. Isaac had no say in who he married, Abraham sent his servant in his name to find a wife for his son. But he didn't want some local girl – he had his servant go all the way back to his own homeland to find a wife from his own family; people went to great lengths to prevent cultures from intermingling. This strange marriage custom also underscored another big difference in modern American culture and the culture of the ancient Levant – people had no sense of individuality. Even in something as intimate as marriage, the spouse was chosen by the head of the family for what they could bring to the entire family, no consideration was given to things as inconsequential as personality or love.

In the search for a wife for Isaac there's also a sense of being guided by God for the right mate that would bring the flourishing of Abraham's descendants, just as God promised. Abraham's servant set up a test at the community watering hole – he'd sit there with his camels and if he asked a woman for water, the one who willingly gave it to him would be the match. It was a test of hospitality and generosity, a trait that Abraham exemplified, too. The girl that passed the test happened to be Abraham's great niece, so the family connection was there, too, as they wanted. It all worked out just as Abraham knew it would – his trust in God's providence again reaped huge rewards. Apparently the marriage was good from the outset because upon making Rebekah his wife we read that Isaac "loved her," not likely a simple euphemism for sex, but an actual emotional connection. Some of that connection may have been from the presence of a kind woman whose presence eased the grief he felt for his mother's death, but we cannot know for sure. What we can know, however, is that yet again Abraham's family shows what goodness is available to those who trust in God's promises. Trust leads to abundant life – something we all seek.

REACT

- How often do we make big decisions out of spite for our family? From dating the kind of person our parents always warned us about, seeking a career our parents disapprove of, or getting tattoos and piercings just to get on our parents' nerves and prove how adult and free we really are, these kinds of actions are so normative that seeking to please our family seems odd. Culture was very different in the world of Abraham. Families were responsible for one another in incredible ways, and in large part due to a belief that the family was responsible for the sins of their ancestors. While our faith tells us that we are not responsible for the sins of previous generations, maybe there's something we could learn from a culture with a strong sense of familial identity. How might things change in your own family if people acted for the whole rather than the individual?
- How well do you remember dating the person you married? What were the customs then, i.e. did you need your parents' permission to date or get married? How have things changed since then? What do you miss, and what do you think has improved?

RESPOND

A New Family Custom: The family was of incredible importance to people of Abraham's day. People thought of themselves less as an individual and more as part of something larger. While our culture is very different, we can still engage in practices that unify our families and strengthen the ties therein. Is there a new practice your family can begin to get closer together? Maybe it's making cookies together or playing games, going on hikes or just telling stories. Finding ways to connect on a deeper level and grow our relationships is one of the best ways not only strengthen our families, but to strengthen each member of the family. Try to do something new with your family, no matter how small or large it may be. Maybe your first, or even tenth, idea fails. But keep trying. Family is worth the work.