

## Prayer for Success

### Genesis 24:34-67

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Sunday, July 3, 2005

Worship at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m.

Let us bow before our Lord. We are grateful, gracious God, that you do not remove yourself from us, but that you come close to us and speak a word to us of good news. May we hear your word, that you love us and that you call us to care for one another in the manner of Jesus, the Christ. So speak to us now to the core of our spirits. May we be changed because you are present with us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

The minister was very preoccupied with what to say to the congregation because more money was needed for the repairs on the church building. He was particularly annoyed when the regular organist did not show up and he had to deal with a substitute organist. (No reflection on Mary, today.) The sub wanted to know what to play, so the pastor said impatiently, "Here's a copy of the service, but you're going to have to think of something to play after I talk about the money." During the service, the minister paused at one point and said, "Brothers and sisters, we have great difficulty because the roof needs more repair. It has cost twice as much as we expected. If any of you can give more, please stand up. And at that moment, the substitute organist played the Star-Spangled Banner. (No reference to the later part of our worship service today.)

That leads me to say thank you again for all the wonderful generosity that you have given as a congregation. The letter that you have in your order of worship is a statement of the wonderful grace of God and generosity that you have shown to this congregation and to the ministry of Jesus Christ here.

Prayer is an important part of our life together, and I urge you today to think of our staff when you pray, for, as you remember I was not too long ago in bed for a couple of weeks. I received a phone call from Harry Winsheimer on Friday in the deepest, darkest tone of voice in which I have ever heard him speak, saying that he was in bed with a bad back. He would appreciate your prayers. He is on painkillers and muscle relaxants, and he is very concerned about his health. Also, our financial manager and administrative director, Laurelle Mathis, had a fire in her home; her kitchen needs to be replaced because of the fire. She would appreciate our prayers. Pray for your staff. We're falling like flies.

Today I want to say something about God's providence. Providence is the historic view that God is involved in human patterns of life, and God brings goodness to our lives. God is involved, and wants good outcomes for us. So God has created a way for those outcomes to come to pass; and there are different ways in which we have seen this kind of teaching on providence in history. One is in the classic theological view called deism, where God is removed from creation. God's providence is put into action at the beginning of time, and God steps back and lets providence take its place among human action. But the Biblical pattern of providence is that God is not removed, but rather is intimately connected in the details of everyday life. God's providence is evident because God is present here and now, and is in relationship to those who are willing to participate. That is the core of this passage.

Deism is the historic reaction to the pattern of supposed Christians who have intimidated, manipulated, and coerced things to happen in history. Deism is a response to a sense that human beings are given rational abilities and reasonableness, and they can use these traits to accomplish what God wants to do in the world. Deism had an undercurrent of distrust of organized religion, and revelation – the whole sense of exclusivity: How could God be so intolerant? The image of God expressed in deism implies that God is a rational being removed and detached from creation, that God has created an ordered universe like the Newtonian universe, and has distanced himself while human beings run it. In deism there is an appeal to a universal common core because of religious and moral principles. God gives us law, and God gives us

principles to live by. So the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount are crucial to our moral development. Deism suggests that superficial differences of ritual and dogma should not divide us, but we should tolerate those differences as human beings. A classic deist view was expressed by Lord Herbert who was one of the foundational people who influenced George Washington, Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. He believed that God is a supreme being, was very much involved in creating the universe and the world, but that we human beings should worship God. That worship should take place with the pattern of practice of good moral behavior. The essence of worship was to do good. We should repent of evil and sin and say no to it, and God would eventually reward and punish those in eternity.

Deism had a strong view of providence. You see that word a lot. But it was a transcendent providence. God is out there, and God has created us as human beings to be the ones who are intimately engaged in the ordinary activities of human beings. After God's initial work, God detaches himself from us. God gives rationality and reasonableness to use our wisdom to lead this world. And God watches from a distance.

Now the Declaration of Independence reflects some of this deistic theology. God is not a tyrant king, nor should we bow to tyrant kings. God creates and gives humanity the freedom to rule itself, and so we shall rule ourselves. God gives certain unalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. God gives human wisdom to leaders to rule with a sense of responsibility and integrity. It is important that we say no to tyranny, and if tyranny tries to oppress us, we have the right to revolt. At the end of the Declaration of Independence we find a very strong emphasis on providence: "For the support of this Declaration of Independence with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor" – the last words of the Declaration of Independence. We have a strong sense that God's providence will guide us in the future.

We do believe that God is providentially involved in guiding human beings to a good future. But biblically there is a difference between deism and Yahwism, between the kind of theology that created the Declaration of Independence and the theology that created the scriptures; between the Hebrew and Christian tradition.

This text clearly shows us today that God is not removed. God is not distant. God has not set the machine of the universe and earth in a pattern of work and then removed himself. God is engaged and invested personally in the everyday aspects of human life. God wants human beings to become partners in the daily leadership of human events. God is not watching us from a distance. God is personally seeking us for personal covenantal relationships, and so God builds a relationship with Abraham and God builds a relationship with the servant of Abraham, Eleazar.

God pursues us, talks to us, God walks with us, God saves us personally. It is imminent providence, not transcendent providence. Yahwism in the Old Testament leads to the understanding of who Jesus is in relationship intimately with God the Father. "Abba" is a personal, intimate, close relationship with the living God. Words that haunt this text are significant words of history for the people of God. "Baruch," a personal blessing of one person to another; God blesses us. "Hesed," a personal kindness of one person to another; God is merciful to us. "Emet," a personal commitment of faithfulness and trustworthiness of one person to another; God is faithful and trustworthy for us. "Naha," a person who guides another person to a good place. God personally guides and directs us to better places as we pray. And "Salah" from the word "Shalom." There will be opportunities for us to get work done and completed, and God will work with us to accomplish that. God walks with us on the journey on the way.

Now Abraham is at the end of his life, and he has a problem. He is probably going to die soon, and his son does not have a wife. Abraham has been walking intimately with God for years and years. Abraham has learned to be a partner and a friend of God. But he is not able to make the great journey to his homeland to get a wife for his son Isaac. So he must depend on his servant Eleazar. In another great act of intimacy, the covenant of placing the hand under the thigh to cement the covenant, Abraham asks Eleazar to put his hand under his thigh, to commit himself to doing a great mission. And Eleazar does that. He is able to do it because he has seen Abraham accomplish impossible things because of an intimate relationship between Abraham and Yahweh. So the servant receives the order, but in the servant's mind he knows that he must rely upon God in the same way that Abraham did. So he offers a prayer for success: "Lord, if you will, give me success. You are the only way, the only presence that can make this happen – for me to be

able to go a thousand mile round trip to find the right woman and bring her back safe and sound. God be with me."

And so he prays that prayer when he enters into the town of Abraham's heritage. He is no sooner finished with the prayer than Rebecca shows up. He has specifically prayed that the woman would come out and offer water not only for the servant to drink, but also to provide water for the camels. Now, the scripture indicates that there are at least 10 camels; camels drink about 25 gallons of water each. It is one thing to have the servant drink; it is another thing to have the camels drink. It's no wimpy woman here. How many times must she go to the well to have 250 gallons of water given to the camels? Needless to say, Eleazar is impressed; and he believes immediately that God has answered his prayer. This is the woman. God has led him in very intimate providential ways to discover the right woman at the right time. He has prayed and God has responded. Now how did this happen? It wasn't just because he suddenly got the inspiration to pray. Abraham had modeled for him an intimate relationship with the living God for years and years. Abraham is his master, his model, his example, his mentor who taught him how to relate to God. There is no way we can learn to pray on our own. We do need people who are our examples and mentors in faith. Not only that, but Eleazar watched Abraham. He was a true disciple; he learned from Abraham. He began to practice the pattern of Abraham. Abraham was his primary model for faith and life.

At a key point in my life, when I was in college, I had the privilege of being mentored by a woman who was an opera singer of tremendous faith. When she entered the room, everyone paid attention. A spinto soprano with a big ego that had been humbled by God. I've told the story a couple of times, but it's worth telling again. I loved her daughter. I wanted to marry her. The daughter looked at my family, my income possibilities, my faith interest in being a pastor, and she decided to marry a doctor instead. Her mother was not pleased with that, and her mother said, "Well, if my daughter isn't wise enough to marry you, I'm going to find someone who is. In fact, I'm going to pray every day now until I find someone for you." And she went on a mission. Now this woman had a deep relationship with God, and when she said that I had this deep sense that she was going to find my wife. And she did.

It is important that we have mentors in our lives whom we can imitate and learn how to behave in faith and prayer, for we become servants of those leaders who disciple us and guide us and train us on how to live life intimately in relationship with God. And so the servant learned to see God as up close and personal. The servant had to make a personal commitment to God. It was no longer Abraham's God that he could serve; this God was now his God. There is a story of a grade school teacher who shows a class the Declaration of Independence in facsimile form. The teacher passes the facsimile out to the students and one by one they pass it from desk to desk looking quickly at it as if enamored with the example of what it is. It comes to a little fellow by the name of Luigi who is a first-generation American. He doesn't just take it in passing. He takes it and carefully, soberly reads it, word by word, for an extended period of time. At the end, he takes out his pen, and he signs his name to it.

That's what it is about. Eleazar needed to sign his name to the covenant that Abraham had already built with God. You have to sign your name to the covenant that other people before you have built with God. You make the declaration personally with your signature and your life. And then you pray. Part of that discernment is to be able to know and discern the difference between good and evil, because God's providence shows us good, not just in general but personally up close and intimately. God's providence is immediate and intimate. ? Joe Gibbs tells the story of the difference between a life that is led by prayer and a life where prayer comes in behind it. Joe tells the story of when things were going very well with the Redskins and his life was economically at a wonderful place, that he decided to invest in real estate in Oklahoma. He did not ask God for advice and counsel. No prayer for guidance. He got into a partnership with several people and over a few months discovered that the whole system had gone bankrupt and he was going to lose everything. He owed thousands of dollars to several people, and had no way to pay it back. Then he began to pray. "Lord, I'm in trouble. You need to intervene. If you don't intervene, I'm not going to be able to make it." All this occurred while the Redskins were winning the Super Bowl. So he prayed for help, and God intervened. In his integrity before God he said, "I will pay back every debt I owe. Lord, help me." And he did, by the grace of God. He learned to be God's partner and to see that God was intimately involved in every aspect of life.

God wants to interact personally with you today. God wants to be your friend and your partner. God wants

to be the one who comes close to you, not distant and cut off. God wants to be sitting right with and walking with you on the way. If you are in the midst of major (or even minor) life decisions, God wants to be with you in those decisions; prayer for success is a normal behavior pattern. Do not buy the deistic theology that says God is somehow removed and put in motion a giant machine in which you are a cog. No – God respects your humanity and wants to invest in you as you are called to invest in God. God blesses us because we have prayed. God will respond to our prayers and be there for us, because God wants to accomplish providentially good things in this world.

Now there's an important piece of this at the very end of the story that we don't want to give up; it's very important in relationship to the understanding of the Declaration of Independence as well. God is not a tyrant. The Deists got this one right. We should not obey tyrants. We should not defer ourselves to people who manipulate, coerce and cajole us, who strong-arm us to make things happen. Even at this moment, where God has clearly said Rebecca is the one, you'll notice that the very last word that is spoken is Rebecca's response: "I am willing to go." God doesn't make us do what we don't want to do. God woos us into a place where we see the benefit of choosing to do the providential thing.

This is the nature of Jesus, the Christ. Jesus does not come as Lord to manipulate and control your life, to oppress you. Jesus comes as Lord as the brother who is the servant, who comes along side of you as God with you – to help you live your life and to be with you in your prayers. And so this is providence up close and personal. It is God who wants to be at your very heart and in the center of your mind. God with you. Jesus is the personal Lord and Savior of individual human beings. Jesus also cares about the big picture of universality and the salvation and redemption of all humanity. But Jesus accomplishes that one human being at a time, just as Eleazer accomplished the search of Rebecca one spouse at a time.

Today, do not believe that God is removed and distant from you. Believe what the scripture teaches – that God is right here to hear your voice, to listen for your call to want him in your life to be a partner. May our Lord Jesus Christ give us the courage and the integrity to walk with God intimately and personally, through Jesus Christ. Amen.