

Here Comes the Bride

by Ray C. Stedman

We are almost at the close of our study in the life of Abraham as we look in Chapter 24 of Genesis. This brings us to the entertaining and delightful story of Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for his son. The remarkable love story of Rebekah and Isaac is one of those tales which we have all known since childhood as one of the loveliest in the Old Testament. This is more than the old but ever new story of “boy meets girl.” It has more than that kind of fascination, and certainly it has more than good suggestions on how to get a wife by proxy. It is a story, as we have seen in the incidents from Abraham’s life, that has meaning for us as well, although it becomes evident toward the end of the life of Abraham that these incidents break over the boundaries of individual application. They become a picture of the work of God himself.

For example: in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, it is easy there to see how this is designed by the Spirit of God, 2,000 years before our Lord was born, to illustrate the heart of the father involved in the cross on Calvary. As Abraham and Isaac trudged up the mountainside together, you can see father and son mounting the hill of Calvary and feel the anguish in that father’s heart as he gives his own beloved son as a living sacrifice there. These stories become luminous in their illustration of New Testament events and truths.

This is true of this story of Rebekah and Isaac. It is a picture of Pentecost. Here is Abraham, standing for God the Father, sending his unnamed servant into the far country to take a bride for his son – to invite her to come, to call, to woo, and to win her – to bring her back at last to the Father’s house where the son is waiting to claim his bride

for himself. How beautifully that portrays how God, at the Day of Pentecost, sent his Spirit into the world! It is the Spirit’s job to call out a people for God’s name, to win a bride for Christ; he has been at this task for almost 2,000 years now, and the Son is waiting to receive that bride. We read in the book of Revelation of the wedding supper of the Lamb, and of the Lord coming to claim his bride for himself, (see Rev 19:7-9).

Yet despite this general application, we don’t want to lose the individual application of these stories. These Old Testament stories are somewhat like dreams. Psychologists tell us that no matter what we dream about, we are always represented. If we dream of an old mule eating hay, that’s us. Whatever else our dream may be, somehow we are involved. I think in a sense, this is true of these Old Testament stories. Paul says, “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come,” (1 Cor 10:11 {RSV}). They are not written just for historic reference. They are written to teach us something, and, therefore, we don’t want to miss this. Read your Old Testament with this in view, and seek to find what the Spirit of God has for you.

If you are a Christian, where are you in this story of Abraham sending his servant to get a bride for his son Isaac? Well, you say, obviously we are the bride, we are the ones who are called by the Spirit of God. This is true. Every Christian remembers how he sensed at one time the calling of the Spirit of God. We remember how he wooed and won us by the loveliness and beauties which are in Jesus Christ, and by a consciousness of our

utter need for him. We were called to love someone we had never seen, and we felt an answering response in our hearts as Christ was painted in vivid colors by the Spirit in our minds. We felt the urge to leave friends and family behind, in the sense of shifting their central place in our affections, and to go after this one who called us. Now we are journeying to meet him at last in that country in the Father's house. We can see ourselves simply here, but this does not exhaust the application of this story, nor does it really disclose the major emphasis.

If you read this chapter through carefully, you will find that the central character is not the bride, Rebekah. Little of her reaction is recorded here; she has sort of a secondary part. The spotlight of the story really follows Abraham's servant. He is the central character. This is a picture, we have already recognized, of the Holy Spirit's work. But remember, the Spirit of God chooses to do his work largely through men and women, through the believers, through the church, through those of us who are his. This is especially true in the work of calling out a people for God's name. God has given us the responsibility and the privilege of being his instruments to call his bride out of the world. So this story becomes a beautiful picture of the whole process of personal evangelism.

The process of bringing others to Christ begins with **the command** of God the Father:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land [this man knew women]; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' he will

send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter. (Gen 24:1-9 {RSV})

The initiative here begins with Abraham. He sends his servant to do this work and binds him to the task with an oath. Putting the hand under the thigh is simply an oriental custom recognizing that the loins of the thigh were the source of life. For the servant, it was a representation of being bound in the very deepest part of his life. This was a solemn oath.

As we apply this to our own situation and see God the Father standing in the place of Abraham here, he is asking every servant to give himself to this task. The servant is unnamed here, I believe, so that you and I can put our names here. We are called by the Father, commanded to go and take a wife for his son.

This is not an option with a believer in Jesus Christ. God has said, not only in the typical fashion we see here, but, in direct statements in the Word of God, again and again, in a most solemn form, that the obligation rests upon a believer to give himself to the task of reaching others for Jesus Christ. God has said, "Take a wife for my son." And to this end the Spirit of God has come into our hearts to dwell. His whole purpose of coming into your life and mine is that he might be what he is, and do what he came to do. Our Lord Jesus is the one dwelling within, and we are told what he came to do. He said, "For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost," (Luke 19:10 {RSV}). If this is what he came to do, we will find him doing it in our lives if we give him the opportunity.

Please notice that the responsibility here is emphasized by the restriction given to the servant. Abraham said to him, "You must not take my son back there. I know how you feel. I know it would be so much easier if you could just take this handsome lad with you. It would be so much easier to convince this girl she ought to come live with him if she could just see him. But don't take Isaac back there!" Why was this odd restriction put upon him? It does seem strange that although it would make the process of courtship so much simpler, he definitely restricts Isaac from going.

The answer is that this is not just an ordinary incident: This is divinely planned, and is intended to exemplify a truth. It illustrates the fact that God's Son is now in his glory and the work of evangelism must go forward in his absence. God does not send Jesus visibly back to earth in order to win the church. How much easier it would seem to be to persuade men and women to believe in him if we could just say, "Well, he is now in San Francisco, and we'd love to take you up there so you could just hear him speak, and see the marks of the nails in his hands. Then you could believe." There is that tendency in our own hearts to think it would go better that way. But the Lord said "No." He sent the Spirit of God to do the work, and, in some remarkable way that we will never fully understand, the Spirit of God can make Jesus Christ more real to a human heart than if he stood before him in human form and flesh.

This is very obviously true, because in the New Testament we discover that when the disciples were accompanying Jesus, personally, they were constantly in a state of confusion and frustration. They could not understand what he said: They were troubled and disturbed time after time. However, when the Day of Pentecost came, and the Spirit of God flooded their hearts, a light came into their eyes that had never been there before. The Scriptures began to open up for them. They became conscious of the reality of Christ and experienced a joy within that they had never possessed before. It is the work of the Spirit to make Christ real to human hearts. Now, that is why God has laid upon every one of us this obligation to spread his word to others.

There is an imaginary account telling of the time when the Lord ascended into glory. He was met by the angels as he came into the throne room of God, and one of them said to him, "Lord, what are your plans now to propagate the work that you have begun down there? What have you devised to carry on this work in your absence?" The Lord said, "I've called twelve men to follow me, and I have taught them, and lived with them for 3½ years. I have left them behind to carry on the work." But the angel said to him, "Lord, what if they fail? What if they don't do this job?" And, according to the account, the Lord shook his head and said, "Well, I have no other plan."

In a sense, this story is true, but I want to hasten to correct the possible false impression that

God has left us to do the job wholly in dependence upon ourselves. Nevertheless, it is true that God has no other plan. He will not send his Son back until the appointed time. Nor will he do it in any other way. He has put the Spirit of God in our hearts so that we might be used in this wonderful work of winning brides for his son. This is our responsibility, and the command of the Father's heart.

The major emphasis of this passage is centered on what we might call "the cooperation of the Spirit." This, I think, is the missing note in much personal evangelism. So many men and women have heard the command of God, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation," (Mark 16:15 {RSV}). They have recognized this is a command, but then they go out acting as though it all depends upon them. The result is that many are laboring in a zeal without knowledge. This is where the buttonholing, grim-faced, fever-eyed fanatic comes from, on the one hand, and, on the other, the timid, blushing, flustered Christian who hardly ever dares to utter a word. There is a failure to recognize that not only has God commanded us to do this, but he has also provided the Spirit by which to do it.

This is what we see in the steps which follow. There are five stages pictured here in what happens when you or I go out to reach someone for Christ:

First of all, there is **expectation**:

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me success today, I pray thee, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the maiden to whom I shall say, 'Pray let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels' – let her be the one whom thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac. By this I shall know that thou hast shown steadfast love to my master." {Gen 24:10-14 RSV}

Now here is a man expecting God to work. He does not go into this land, and say to himself, "Well now, the whole job is up to me. I've got to find this girl, and how in the world am I going to find the right one? And after that, I must persuade her to come. How am I going to do that?"

It is very simple for this man because he knows he is not left alone to do this task. An invisible partner is at work, preparing the way for him. I wish we would learn this lesson about our own witness. God has not left it to us to do alone. The work of reaching men and women for Christ is not a matter of human persuasion, but is a divine call. God is at work to move, shape, and develop the lives and hearts of all. Our job is simply to recognize this.

Do you notice how Abraham's servant does it? First of all, he prays, revealing his expectation that God is at work. In his simple prayer he asks God to make the way clear, to indicate the one to whom God would have him speak. As he prays about his problem, he expects God to answer.

This is a wonderful concept to remember when witnessing. When I get aboard a plane or train or go someplace where I may be in contact with someone who doesn't know the Lord, I ask God to indicate who is the one he wants me to talk with. Maybe there is no one; maybe the Lord wants me to spend my time reading or studying. But very likely he does have someone. I don't know who God is working with, but I know that he will direct me through ways of which I am hardly conscious.

When I get on the train, I find the best seat first. That is the obvious thing to do. Then I trust that the man who sits down beside me may be that man, or the one in front of me, or the one behind me. But I don't know. It may be the fellow who is to get on at a station down the line, or the one that I will meet in the washroom, or the porter. I don't know. Well, how do I find out?

Let's look at the next step. The first step was expectation; the next one is **confirmation**:

Before he had done speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar upon her shoulder. The maiden was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, and

filled her jar, and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Pray give a little water to drink from your jar." She said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly let down her jar upon her hand, and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have done drinking." So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not. (Gen 24:15-21 {RSV})

Now here is the confirmation. "The man gazed at her in silence," we read. If we stopped there we might think it was because he was so amazed at a teenage girl so willing to work. I don't know how authentic it is, but I am told that a camel can drink twenty-one gallons of water at a sitting, and she drew water for all his camels. No wonder he gazed at her in silence!

Specifically, though, we are told that it was to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not. "Is this the one, LORD?" As he watched her he knew that this was the one, because she did what he had asked the LORD as a sign that she should do.

I don't think it is wise to ask for particular signs in every case. Sometimes we invent these signs in our own mind and use them as an excuse for not doing any witnessing. If we are expecting God to show us someone to talk with, he will indicate to us whom he has prepared.

Many years ago, I was on my way out to Japan one summer, waiting in the airport at Honolulu for a plane to Tokyo. It was early in the morning and the airport was almost deserted. I bought a newspaper to read as I waited for my flight. In it I read an account of a young Filipino eye doctor who was in Honolulu on his way home to Manila. He was a surgeon who had perfected an operation no one else had done, and he had been demonstrating it to the New York doctors. I read through the account, along with other things, and thought nothing more of it. When the time came I boarded my plane, and sat down in the most comfortable seat to wait for the take-off. Soon a man came along and sat down beside me. I turned to say, "Hello," and saw that it was a young Filipino. I still didn't make any connection but asked him his name, and he told me he

was a doctor. So I said, "What kind of a doctor are you?" He said. "I'm an eye surgeon." Then I remembered the newspaper account I had just read about this young Filipino eye surgeon, and we had wonderful fellowship which led quickly to a discussion of the Word of God. When I left him, I gave him a New Testament, and when I met him later, in Manila, he told me he'd been reading it every day since. Now this is the confirmation, some little thing by which God says "Here is the one with whom I've been working, and here you are beside him."

The Lord brought the two together. You can expect wonderful experiences to happen if you begin to watch for God to work through you like this, alert for the indication of the Spirit at work.

After the confirmation comes the third stage, **the preparation:**

When the camels had done drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, "Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to lodge in?" She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." She added, "We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in." The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD, and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen." (Gen. 24:22-27 {RSV})

Abraham's servant knows that this is the right girl. He has had the sign confirmed. But he doesn't immediately open up the Scriptures to Romans 3:23 and begin to blast her with her status as a sinner. He doesn't brashly chasten her with the Lord's wrath and scare her away, as we sometimes do. Nor does he immediately start talking about Isaac. Instead, he wisely arranges for private conversation allowing sufficient time to make a proper contact. He bathes the whole matter again in prayer and thanksgiving and waits for a suitable time to talk.

I think this is a very important step. Sometimes in our zeal we jump down people's throats

and frighten them, causing them to back away from us. We must remember to take time to lay ample groundwork and to prepare for a proper presentation. Perhaps an invitation to dinner is better than just leaning over the back fence and trying to give the gospel in five minutes.

The fourth step is **the presentation** itself. In the next section we shall find the whole story spelled out plainly and frankly.

So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, menservants and maidservants, camels and asses. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and to him he has given all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell; but you shall go to my father's house and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son.' I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.' But he said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and prosper your way; and you shall take a wife for my son from my kindred and from my father's house; then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my kindred; and if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

"I came today to the spring, and said, 'O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now thou wilt prosper the way which I go, behold, I am standing by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Pray give me a little water from your jar to drink," and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also," let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son.'

"Before I had done speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Pray let me drink.' She quickly said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also.' So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also. Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose,

the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."

When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the LORD. And the servant brought forth jewelry of silver and of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. (Gen 24:34-53 {RSV})

The servant leaves nothing out, but is forthright and candid. He begins with the glories of Abraham, telling about all his wealth flocks, herds, silver and gold, servants, camels and asses. Why? Because this is the inheritance of the son. Then he recounts how God led him along the way, i.e., he gives his own personal testimony about it. He ends by presenting to her the gifts Isaac had sent along, the sample of the riches he was offering to her.

What a picture of how we should talk to those who are interested and whom the Lord is seeking to reach by focusing it all on Christ! Our job, you see, is not to change people's habits. We are not out to get people to stop drinking, smoking, dancing, going to movies, etc. That isn't our concern, our job is to win them to Christ, not to make church members out of them. This servant did not go into the far country and try to start a *Fans for Isaac Club*. His job was to win her heart and bring her out of the far country to the son, and that is our job, also.

The fifth and last state is **the actual invitation:**

And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me back to my master." Her brother and her mother said, "Let the maiden remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." [There was a

reluctance here to let her go.] But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way; let me go that I may go to my master." They said, "We will call the maiden, and ask her." And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go." (Gen 24:54-58 {RSV})

There is the invitation, the altar call if you please. It climaxes the assault on the will of this girl. It is not an easy choice that she is asked to make. It is revolutionary, disturbing, upsetting. All of her life she has been the protected jewel of that household. She has been kept within the family bosom, cared for, protected and guarded, and now she is asked to go with a man whom she has just met a day or two before, to meet another man who is an utter stranger to her. Yet something about the winsomeness of his appeal, his forthrightness, the glory and attractiveness of what she has heard, has won her heart. She is ready to go. We need to recognize that the invitation we give to men and women to become Christians is not an easy choice. It is a revolutionary one. We must clarify the matter, and lay it before them: "Will you go?" And she said, "I will go."

Finally, in the last scene, we see **the communion** with the son. The work of the Trinity is evident throughout this story. It begins with the command of the Father, proceeds with the cooperation of the Spirit, and ends with the communion with the Son. This is a delightful scene at the end where heart meets heart:

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was dwelling in the Negeb. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she alighted from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man yonder, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (Gen 24:62-67 {RSV})

The last words of the servant are here. When Rebekah sees Isaac walking in the field, she says, "Who is this man!" And the servant's words are, "It is my master." This is the place to which we are to bring men and women. The time comes in our dealing with them when we must stop talking about our own personal testimony. We must turn them to look at the one who is winning their hearts, and say, "There he is, it's the Master. You deal with him now, just talk directly with him."

I think the conversation here when the two met was probably rather stumbling at first. She was very shy, and he very reserved. She got off her camel, all atwitter inside. She put her veil over her face so he wouldn't see how she was blushing.

This strong, manly man came up to her, and said, "Hello."

She said, "Hello." He said, "Are you Rebekah?" She said, "Yes," and dropped her eyes.

Then he said, "I'm Isaac." (She knew it all the time.) He said, "You can call me Ike."

She said, "Well, my friends call me 'Becky.'" And off they go, hand in hand.

But look at the servant standing by. Can't you imagine him grinning from ear to ear, registering the joy in his heart at the fulfillment of his mission in bringing a bride for Isaac. Doesn't it remind you of those words of John the Baptist when he introduced the Lord Jesus to Israel and his disciples left him and went to follow the Lord? Someone asked him how he felt, and he said, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore, this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease," (John 3:29-30 {RSV}). We are like that servant.

We can expect the same brimming of joy in our own hearts as we watch someone join together with his Lord in new life.

Do you see now that the story of Abraham's servant is your story as well?