

Part 25: What Promise Directs You?

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Have you ever noticed that the promises that we believe have a way of directing our decisions in life?

Kids, you've probably noticed this in some of the movies you've seen. Fievel the mouse sails all the way across the Atlantic Ocean in the promise that "there are no cats in America." Elsa isolates herself in an ice castle in the promise that she can "let it go" without hurting anyone. Flint Lockwood risks over-mutating food in the promise that everyone will love him.

But if we know how these stories turn out, then we also know that it matters what promises you trust in. Because they don't always deliver.

And one of the most prevalent promises in our culture is the promise of fulfillment in romantic love. Disney princesses assure us that our greatest longings can be satisfied through true love's kiss. But along the way, this promise can mislead even princesses. Princess Fiona overlooks Lord Farquaad's shortcomings in the promise that true love's kiss will protect her image. Princess Ana spends her last hours on a quest to "go kiss Hans" in the promise that true love's kiss will fix her frozen heart. It matters what promise directs you.

And today, in our passage, we seem to find all the makings of a Disney princess movie. There's a quest to get the girl, mystical guidance to identify "the one," the moment of tension in whether or not she's willing to go, the magical moment of love at first sight, and the anticipation of a happily-ever-after. Should this story encourage hope in the promise of finding our true love? Does it give us directions for how to be in God's will so we can experience our own happily-ever-after?

For some people, passages like this might be discouraging. You might feel despair at having never had that magical love-at-first sight experience. Or maybe you're unhappily married or divorced and you feel shame that you must have misread the signs and missed out on God's will for your life. Or maybe you're frustrated with God because you've prayed all the prayers and followed all the signs but he's still withholding what you long for.

But we might find as we look at this story that we're trusting in the wrong promises and following the wrong signs because we're looking at the wrong love story. We do see things about relationships and guidance and decisions and marriage. But what we'll see is that it's in recognizing God's faithfulness to fulfill *his* promise that you'll actually find the love you need. And that will send you in the direction you need to go.

And so our main point today is this: God's loving promise shapes our willing direction.

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In love, God promised reconciliation with himself. And he has accomplished that through his promised Son, Jesus. Now to everyone who receives Jesus, he gives us direction for our lives and sets

our agenda in his reconciling love. He wants us to align our lives with his promise in Christ to bring blessing to our relationships and to the nations.

And we're going to see this in 4 points:

1. God's promise in relationships (v.1-9)
2. God's promise in guidance (v.10-51)
3. God's promise in decisions (v.52-61)
4. God's promise in marriage (v.62-67)

So let's look at our first point: God's promise in relationships.

1) God's Promise in Relationships

Let's read Genesis 24:1-4.

So we see that Abraham is very old, and he's going to die soon. In fact the wedding in this chapter takes place between two funerals. Sarah died in the last chapter, and Abraham is going to die in the next chapter. And so there's a transition that's happening right now in the book of Genesis, going from one generation to the next. And so the big question at this point in the book is "How will God continue to fulfill his promises if the current generation is dying? How's he going to keep the line of promise going?"

And if you're just joining us, what we've been seeing is that our hope is in this promised seed - in a person. And this promised person is how God is going to redeem the whole world.

And Abraham believes God's promise. And that's why he acts in faith here and commissions his servant to get a wife for Isaac. Abraham is thinking carefully about who Isaac marries. He's concerned to find the wife for Isaac that is least likely to lead him away from God's promise.

And so while we don't have arranged marriages in our culture today, there's a general principle here to be concerned about the kinds of relationships our kids have. Your child doesn't have to be very old before you start worrying about who they might marry one day. And Abraham is concerned too. But as we'll see, his primary concern is whether the relationship will align with God's promise.

We can pursue relationships in ways that get us out of alignment with God's priorities. We can be what the Bible calls "unequally yoked." We see God's agenda for relationships in Matthew 28 where Jesus commissions the church to make disciples teaching them to observe all that he has commanded. So our ultimate goal in every relationship is to love people by helping them know and become like Jesus.

And that includes having relationships with unbelievers. As we'll see, the woman who becomes Isaac's wife actually comes from a family that isn't following God. But we want to be on guard for whether our relationships in the surrounding culture might influence *us* more than we influence them.

Isolating our kids from the world won't make them pure and innocent because their greatest problem is inside of them, just like our greatest problem is inside of us. The big principle is: do you care about

the kind of relationships your children have and are making. There's lots of relationships we can build around, but we want to help them build around those that build around God's promise.

And so for Abraham with his parental responsibility in that cultural context, this is his concern as well. So God's loving promise shapes Abraham's direction in finding a wife for Isaac.

But while Abraham is concerned about where a wife for Isaac will come from, his *servant* is concerned if she will even be willing to come back at all.

Let's read v.5.

And that's really the question that's going to be addressed in the rest of the chapter: "will she be willing to follow him?" And the answer to that question is what's going to answer that bigger question: "How is God going to keep the covenant line and his promises going?"

Let's keep reading in v.6-9.

So not only is Abraham confident that God will provide a wife to Isaac to continue the promised line, he's also confident in God's promise to give his offspring *this* land. So taking Isaac out of the land wouldn't be trusting God's promise. He's tried leaving the promised land before. He's tried getting the promised son through disobedience. But this time, he knows God doesn't need his disobedience in order for the promises to be fulfilled. But he also recognizes that God uses means.

So God's promise gives Abraham a direction in his decisions, but he makes decisions in an open-handed way. Even if his servant isn't able to bring back a wife for Isaac, he knows God will do it by some other means.

So confidence in what God has promised gives us open-handed direction. We know he's promised to save people through sharing the gospel. But we don't always know when it's a wise time to have an evangelistic conversation. We know he's promised that our suffering will become a conduit of comfort to others in their suffering. But we don't always know how to comfort someone in their suffering. So we take steps to align our direction in relationships with the things God has promised to do. But we do so humbly recognizing that our efforts don't always produce the results we think they will and his plan often unfolds in ways we don't expect.

So Abraham has open-handed confidence as he seeks to find a wife for Isaac.

Now sometimes we have misplaced confidence. We might be confident that God will provide us a spouse or give us a child or save our friend. And these are good things to desire and pray for. But did God promise us these things? Abraham knows God will provide a spouse for Isaac. We don't have that same guarantee for ourselves. But we do have the same God. And we can trust that he is near and present and loving and directing everything that happens in our lives according to the promises he *has* revealed to us in Christ.

So what promise directs you in relationships? We want to see the relationships in our lives as a stewardship from God where our agenda is their flourishing in Christ.

God's loving promise shapes our willing direction.

And so Abraham's servant leaves on his mission with open-handed confidence in God's promises.

And this leads us to our second point: God's Promise in Guidance

2) God's Promise in Guidance

Let's read v.10-14.

So the servant is sent out like the Grand Duke with the glass slipper. He travels over 500 miles all the way back to Abraham's homeland. He had a long time to think about what might happen when he arrived. But instead of panicking, he decides to pray. He knows God has appointed a wife for Isaac, but he has no idea who it is. So he arrives and prays that he'll be able to tell who she is by her character. He asks that God would arrange things so that the woman who responds to him with kindness and hospitality would be the one God has appointed for Isaac.

Now, we need to remember when we come to a passage like this that we are reading a narrative - it's a historical account describing what happened. So we don't want to confuse what's narrative with what's normative. We have to consider "is this descriptive or prescriptive." For instance, this is describing an arranged marriage, but this isn't commanding arranged marriages. So we need to take into account God's intent behind the narrative as we read descriptions of what happened.

In the same way, is this passage giving us instructions on how to seek guidance from God? Are we supposed to make a deal with God in order to discern his will for who to marry or what job to take? Like "God let the first woman who makes eye contact with me at the party be the one I'm supposed to ask out." Or "God let the first job that makes me an offer be the one I'm supposed to take."

Often what might be motivating us to do this is that we don't want to make decisions that might cause us to suffer. When we say we want to be in "God's will," what we might actually mean is that we want to be on a path where things work out in a way that's comfortable and safe and fulfilling. But is that what it means to be in God's will?

You see, we can experience a lot of anxiety in trying to discern God's will for our lives. We can unintentionally be superstitious and try to analyze everything around us looking for signs of what we're supposed to do. And then when we think we followed the signs and things don't turn out the way we hoped, we can feel like God failed us - or maybe we failed God by reading the signs wrong. It can feel like God is punishing us or shaking his head at us for missing the signs - like "I had the perfect plan for you, but you wrecked it."

But wasn't it *because* Job was doing things right that God permitted Satan to test him? Was it because Paul got the signs wrong that he was arrested in Jerusalem and went through beatings, unjust trials, and shipwrecks? We might need to think differently about what it means to be in God's will.

First, we need to notice what promise the servant was trusting in. Twice in his prayer, the servant bases his requests on God's steadfast love for Abraham. The word translated "steadfast love" is "hesed." It refers to God's promise-keeping love. The servant is praying for something that's consistent with what God has already promised to do - it aligns with the covenant God already made. He's not trying to discern a path to his own personal fulfillment. He's just asking God to act in ways

consistent with what he's promised Abraham. He's humbly, open-handedly asking God to help him cooperate with what God has already promised in love.

How does God's agenda influence your prayers? Do we only want God to cooperate with our agenda for peace and security and comfort and success? Or do we have a "not my will but yours be done" attitude even when the outcome might be difficult?

What promise directs your prayers?

God started answering the servant's prayer before he even finished. As was read before, a woman comes on the scene with her water jar and is eager to do exactly what the servant had prayed for. It says that she was attractive, but that wasn't primarily the feature that got his attention.

When it comes to dating, external appearances might be the only guidance we ask for. We assume prince charming is always prince charming, but even our movies show that's not always the case. Someone should be asking, "Who is this Hans?" God created beauty to be appreciated. But notice that he's not drawing our attention to mere physical appearance but to character.

Her character actually matches that of Abraham's. The same words for how she works quickly and runs were used of Abraham when he was showing hospitality to visitors earlier in the book. Everything is going exactly according to the servant's prayer. And then it says, "The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not." The servant is still cautious, and he waits.

We can take the smallest thing going the way we want as a confirmation God is affirming our agenda. But just because things line up or doors open doesn't mean God is telling us to walk through them. Paul models this in 2 Corinthians where a door was open for him in the Lord to preach in a particular location and yet his spirit wasn't at rest and he went elsewhere instead (2 Cor. 2:12-13). It's simpler if open doors were always signs we're supposed to walk through them. But it actually takes walking in trust and dependence on God in relationship with him to make decisions in faith not knowing what the outcome will be.

So even with an apparent miraculous answer to prayer, the servant is still patient and wants to make sure he doesn't push his own agenda.

So then he asks the woman who she is. And it turns out she's related to Abraham. She's the daughter of Bethuel the son of Abraham's brother Nahor who had a wife named Milcah. So Rebekah is Abraham's grandniece. And again, she shows hospitality and offers Abraham's servant to stay with her family.

Let's read the servant's response in v.26-28.

The servant can't contain himself any longer, and he worships the Lord. In hindsight, the servant can see that God led him straight to the person God had appointed. And recognizing providence leads to praise. God is demonstrating his continuing, promise-keeping love for Abraham in this providential meeting.

And this leads us to our third point: God's promise in decisions

3) God's Promise in Decisions

And so Rebekah goes home and tells her family what's going on. And her brother Laban rushes out and invites Abraham's servant to come home and shows him great hospitality. But the servant is urgent about his mission. And so, he recounts the whole story we just read all over again in detail.

Now why would Moses waste so much space on repeated content? Well he's reinforcing that in hindsight, we can see God's faithfulness to his promises in his providence.

One definition of God's providence is "the generous, careful hand of the Lord governing the details of our lives for his glory and for our good." Everything that happens in the Christian's life is providential. God is working all things for our good - to fulfill his promise to make us more like Christ until one day we're with him in glory.

God's providence is working even in your deciding. Abraham made decisions open-handedly. His servant prayed and moved forward tentatively. But when we look back, we see God's providence directed everything. And that leads to worship.

Understanding that God is going to providentially work out his sovereign purposes in our lives helps bring clarity to what it means to make decisions according to God's will.

We can see this in James 4:13-17.

The problem that James is pointing out is that we do not know what tomorrow will bring. So instead, we ought to say "if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." He says you'll find out the Lord's will after it's happened. He's referring to God's secret/sovereign will. Everything that unfolds in history will providentially be according to his secret/sovereign will. The whole point is that you will not know what tomorrow will bring. So we need to make our plans in an open-handed way prepared for the Lord to direct things according to his will. But does that mean James doesn't care about guidance? Well v.17 is encouraging us to do "the right thing" - which James says is to be a "doer of the word." He wants us to make decisions acknowledging God's sovereign will (that he gets to decide the outcome), but he also wants us to make decisions in accordance with God's revealed will - what he has commanded us to do in his word. God calls us to obedience, not omniscience.

We're always in God's sovereign will, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, he wants us to be in his revealed will - walking in obedience to the commands and principles in his word. For instance, when you're considering a move for a job opportunity, the door might be open, but biblical considerations might be: (1) would the job require you to do anything immoral, (2) what are you wanting out of the job and does that align with God's values or is it an idol, (3) if you have a spouse, how will this affect your ability to fulfill your role in marriage, (4) if you have kids, how will this affect your role as a parent, (5) is there a good church there so you don't forsake gathering together, (6) how will it affect your ability to participate in fulfilling the one-another commands in the church, (7) have you prayed and asked God for wisdom, (8) or should you seek wise counsel. Whatever options are left after testing them like this, you get to pick. You make plans in accordance with God's revealed will and trust that "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." So no matter what happens you'll be in his sovereign will.

Now what if you took a job for sinful reasons or you got married ignoring wise counsel? Maybe you've repented, but you're still living with the consequences of your decision. Does that mean you ruined God's plan for your life? Well God's plan isn't thrown off by our sins. He's calling us to obey his revealed will right now. But in his redeeming purposes, even when we meant it for evil - God meant it for good.

We don't need to discern God's secret will for *our* agenda but instead need to recognize God's providence in *his* agenda to work all things - including hardship and including our failings - to fulfill every promise in Christ. God's providence will get you where you're supposed to be.

And so the servant says that God led him by the "right" way. God's providence got him exactly where he was supposed to be.

Then he urges the family to make a decision that aligns with God's steadfast love for Abraham.

Let's read v.49.

He's telling Rebekah's family, "God's providence in this is obvious. God is showing steadfast love and faithfulness to Abraham. But will *you*? Will you align your agenda with the God who is faithfully fulfilling his promises?"

And so the family can't deny God's providence and they respond in v.50-51.

And so they align their decision with God's promises and release Rebekah to go with the servant. But then they decide to delay.

Let's read v.52-57.

Again, the servant worships God. He gives costly gifts to Rebekah and the family. And notice how he's stewarding Abraham's resources in line with God's agenda.

Do your decisions with how you use your resources line up with God's promises? It's easy to listen to the promises of security in your finances - or the promise of status in owning nice things - or the promise of freedom in vacations only to find out that there actually are "cats in America." Savings accounts, homes, vehicles, and vacations are not bad things. But what promise directs your finances? Your budget reflects your worship. So where do your decisions with your budget reflect hope in God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises? We want to trust God's promise that he's given us everything to enjoy while also trusting his promise that he loves a joyful giver. So it might look like making a sacrifice in one area in order to have the greater joy of being generous in another.

So everything seems to be going smoothly, but then Rebekah's mother and her brother decide to delay the departure. There are subtle hints throughout this passage (that we'll see confirmed later in Genesis) that Laban is out to get whatever he can. He sees all the gifts and resources Abraham's servant has, and he tries to delay God's agenda.

Competing promises distract from the right agenda. Rebekah's family is trying to have a foot in both worlds. They're trying to have it both ways. Sure we're onboard but just...later.

We can see competing promises operating in sexual temptation in dating. It's not the moment when you've crossed some subjective physical line that you started compromising. There were a host of small compromises that led up to that moment. There were competing promises offering intimacy, belonging, and satisfaction versus the promises that Christians are united to Christ, can say no to sin because we aren't slaves anymore, and can obey God's commands knowing they are for our good. Where are your decisions delaying your cooperation with God's promises? What promise directs your dating? And if that's you right now, remember the promise of the father who runs out to embrace the prodigal son. Let the promise of grace direct you home.

So the servant resists the distraction. He has no reason to stay and wait around. So the family lets Rebekah decide.

Let's read v.58-61.

There are several parallels here between Rebekah and Abraham that Moses is drawing out. The word for "go" here is the same word God originally spoke to Abraham earlier when he said "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." That's what Rebekah's doing right now.

Rebekah is in the same land that Abraham was in. She is being called to go to the same land that God promised Abraham. She's leaving behind her family and her kindred. And just as Abraham went, she says, "I will go."

The original concern at the beginning of this chapter was if Rebekah would be willing to go. And here we see that it's through the faith of Abraham that she is.

In aligning her decision with God's promise, she is wrapped into the covenant promises of Abraham. She's not just leaving for Isaac but for the promise that is behind Isaac. The promise of Christ.

If you're not a Christian, then this is the most important decision you will make. God has followed through on his promise of reconciliation with him through the cross of Christ. He isn't stingy with his invitation to you. The Spirit and the Bride say "come." "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." He lived obediently in your place and died for your sins as a substitute for all who humbly receive him. In God's providence you are here today. He's calling you to come right now. Will you receive that gift of reconciliation through faith in Jesus? God's loving promise directs you to Christ. Will you come to him?

Or maybe you're someone who is not sure if you're a Christian. Maybe you would say you've tried to put your faith in Jesus, but you're not even sure what that means. Well faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. To put your faith in Jesus, you have to transfer your trust from something else. It's a decision to renounce trust in your own ability to be okay on your own and to instead rely on the finished work of Christ. That is putting your faith in Jesus. And that change of perception leads to a change in direction. If you want to know if you trust Jesus, then trust him right now in obedience while accepting that he loves you because of *his* performance, not yours.

As she's about to go, Rebekah's family gives her a blessing that is reminiscent of God's blessing of Abraham earlier [Gen. 22:17-18]. God said: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your

offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Her family’s blessing unwittingly acknowledges that she has become part of God’s promise in Christ to bring blessing to the nations.

The call to the unconverted is a call to come. But to those who have come to Jesus, the call is to go. We go seeking the joy of our master in calling others to the promised reconciliation in Christ. We are ambassadors for Christ seeking to represent him in all of our relationships. How will you decide to spend your life in your home, in your education, in your workplace, in your plans for the future? What promise directs you?

Kids, I want to encourage you to ask your parents later today about where your family does the things that you do because of God’s promises. It could be a cool opportunity to realize how God’s promises relate to how your family spends time and money and the ways you’re involved in other people’s lives.

God’s loving promise shapes our willing direction.

And so, God has provided the appointed wife for Isaac. And it’s only now that we finally come to the love story. And this is our final point: God’s Promise in Marriage

4) God’s Promise in Marriage

Let’s read v.62-67.

So they meet one another, and Isaac takes her home to Sarah’s tent and she becomes his wife. The mention of Sarah’s tent reinforces that Rebekah is now replacing Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah are taking center-stage as the next generation in the promised line that will ultimately lead to Christ. So by the end of the chapter God has shown himself faithful to continue the promise to the next generation.

And it says that Isaac loved her. And the word for love here is actually a different word from “hesed.” This word means to like or love, but it doesn’t refer to the covenant faithfulness love that we’ve seen throughout the rest of the chapter. And so the love story between Isaac and Rebekah is only mentioned briefly in these short verses. But in reality, the whole chapter has been about the greater love story of God for his people. The bigger story that Isaac and Rebekah’s story fits into is the story of a Father providing a bride for his Son. And that’s the story that each of our lives fits into.

It’s not a love like Rebekah’s or a love like Isaac’s that we ultimately need but the steadfast love of God that fulfills his promise to provide a way back to him through the bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

And for those of us who are married, this also shapes our direction in marriage.

Princess movies come to a close with a wedding and the promise of happily-ever-after. But they never show you a Monday morning after the honeymoon when there’s bills to pay and disappointed expectations and conflicts to resolve.

A pastor speaking at a wedding once said, “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.” (Now obviously, we aren’t addressing an abusive marriage here, and if that’s you, then we want the church to be a safe place for you to get help.) But just in normal marriages, a husband and wife’s agenda is often to try to change their spouse to meet their felt needs. But marriage is a call to love another sinner as you have been loved. It’s a covenant - a promise - not to meet someone halfway, but to graciously reflect Christ’s love to another sinner like you.

If you’re married, then remember *who* God has promised to be for you that your spouse was never intended to be. Remember that your efforts to love your spouse aren’t in the promise that your spouse will respond how you want but in the promise that your heavenly Father is pleased. Remember that even when your spouse seems like your enemy, you can love your enemy and seek to overcome evil with good using the weapons of thoughtfulness and being helpful in the hopes that they will repent.

In God’s providence, your disappointments in marriage might be the very place that you grow in amazement at Christ’s grace for you, humble dependence on him, and displaying his covenant-keeping love.

But regardless of if you’re married, God’s agenda for the church is to invite and present one another mature in Christ at the great wedding supper of the Lamb. It’s only in connection with this greater love story that all our relationships find their place.

God’s loving promise shapes our willing direction. What promise will direct you?