

“DISCOVERING GOD’S WILL” (Genesis 24:1-67)

This morning I want to talk to you about discovering God’s will and plan for your life. One of the more challenging aspects of walking by faith is understanding what God wants you to do – whether it’s where to go to college, who to marry, what career to pursue, where to live, what ministry to be involved in, or any number of daily decisions and choices you face.

The subject of God’s will brings to mind a story enshrined in my family’s history – and when my Uncle Howard first told it at a family reunion, we were all mesmerized. In the late 1940s my mom’s side of the family lived back in New Hampshire. My mom’s father was a pastor, and in time his health began to fail. His doctor said, “You need to get out of these harsh New England winters and move to some warm climate like Florida or California.”

So my mom’s two older brothers, Howard and Paul, as the patriarchs of the family, got together and said, “What should we do?” Howard, the oldest, said, “Let’s spend some time praying and seeking guidance from God’s Word and see what the Lord says.” Paul agreed. Howard asked him, “Are you in any particular place in your Bible reading?” Paul said, “As a matter of fact, I’m starting the book of Deuteronomy tomorrow.” “Okay,” Howard said, “Let’s both start reading Deuteronomy and listen to what the Lord says.

The next morning, they both read chapter one of Deuteronomy where God commands Moses to led Israel into the Promised Land after forty years of wandering. When they came to verse 6 it said, in the King James, “Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount.” Is the Lord saying that we have lived long enough in New Hampshire?

They continued reading in verse 7, “Turn you, and take your journey.” Okay Lord, we’ll go. But should we go to Florida or California?

They continued reading, “Go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto.” There aren’t many mountains between here and Florida, they said, but there are plenty of mountains between here and California.

They continued, “In the plain.” The Great Plains, they said. They continued, “In the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by the sea side, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the river Euphrates.” California is to the south, it’s by the sea, and to get there you have to cross the great Mississippi River! Finally, verse 8 said, “Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land.”

Howard and Paul both looked at each other and said, “Is this from the Lord?” Howard said, “Why don’t we keep reading for a few more days and see if the Lord confirms this. Howard said that about 4 or 5 days later they came to a verse that said, in effect, “I’ve told you what to do, now go do it!” That was the day before Christmas in 1948.

The next day, Howard said, he and Paul hitch-hiked to California to scout things out for the family, and they arrived five days later. Howard says that after being there a week or two, they ran out of money. One evening Howard laid stretched out on the floor and prayed, “Lord, we thought it was your will that we move out here, but if I can’t get a job then I can’t stay. I will give it one more day. If I can’t find a job, then I will go back to New Hampshire. And just so I know that it is your will, I am not going to ask anyone.”

So the next day Howard said he went down to a small park with a duck pond and sat on a bench. He said, “Lord, I’m just going to sit here and if someone wants to give me a job, they can find me here.” Howard said he sat on the bench all day and nothing happened. So he said to the Lord, “I guess it’s time to go back home.”

As he was packing up, he remembered a church he attended the Sunday before was having a men’s fellowship dinner. He said, “Maybe I will go and get a good meal before I leave the next day.” The guy he was sitting next to at the dinner asked him, “You wouldn’t happen to be looking for a job, would you?” Howard said, “Maybe.” He got the job and a few months later the whole family moved to California.

There is nothing about these stories that I necessarily recommend as a way to find God’s will for your life, and I don’t think Uncle Howard would recommend it now either. I’m not quite sure that you can take the Bible verses they did and apply to themselves, but what I really admire about my uncles is the great faith they had in God’s guidance and direction for their lives. They asked the Lord for guidance and they trusted Him to provide it.

One thing we all have in common is that we don’t entirely know what God’s will for our future is. If we did know, we would no longer be walking by faith. One theologian said, “The only things you can know for sure is your spiritual position in Christ and your eternal destiny. The remainder of your future is unknown to you until it happens.”

There is no real way we can know ahead of time how our lives will unfold. None of us knows for sure what career we will have, who we will marry, how our kids will turn out, what health issues we will face, and what financial difficulties we will encounter – we don’t know any of things for sure until after they happen. Then we can look back, as my uncle did, and see the hand of God moving in the details and circumstances of life.

That brings us this morning, by way of a long introduction, to Genesis 24, as we wrap up our study of the life of Abraham. In the future I want to continue in Genesis with the lives of Jacob and Joseph, but next week we are going to begin a study in the great New Testament book of Ephesians. Then after Ephesians, Lord willing, we will get back to Genesis.

After burying his wife in chapter 23, chapter 24 records one final faith test Abraham faces before he dies in chapter 25 – and that is to find a wife for his son Isaac. Every believing parent wants their child to find a good, godly mate – but in Abraham’s case, all of God’s promises to him – including having descendants as numerous as the stars – rested on Isaac finding a godly wife to carry out the plan of God for the world.

Chapter 24 is the longest chapter in Genesis – 67 verses – and for sake of time I will summarize some parts of the passage. There are many ways we can approach this passage, but the overriding message, I believe, is how we discover God’s will. While the passage deals specifically with finding a mate – and I could preach a whole message on that – the principles found in this story applies to anything for which you are seeking God’s guidance. In this passage we find six basic, universal principles that guide us in knowing and doing God’s will.

The first principle is: **Act on what you know to be true**. Another way to put this is: While you are waiting for God to reveal what you don’t yet know, obey what He has already revealed to you. Let’s look at verses 1-4... “Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, ‘Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.’”

Abraham didn’t know specifically who Isaac’s wife would be, but he did know two things: One, he knew that Isaac had to have a wife in order for God’s promises to be fulfilled; and two, he knew that Isaac’s wife must be from Abraham’s people, not a local Canaanite girl. As His chosen people, God wanted Abraham’s family to be distinct from the other nations who lived in direct contradiction to the morals and values of God’s people. The most important component in a marriage, above everything else, is spiritual compatibility. That’s why the New Testament says, *“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.”* Abraham wanted Isaac to marry someone from his side of the family – the family of Shem that God chose to receive His covenant promises. So Abraham decides to send his servant back to his own people – some 500 miles away – to find a wife for Isaac.

Verses 5-8... “The servant asked him, ‘What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?’ ‘Make sure that you do not take my son back there,’ Abraham said. ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father’s household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’—he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there. If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there.’”

Abraham makes it clear that he and Isaac are staying in the land God promised them. He doesn’t even need to pray about it – Isaac isn’t going anywhere – his future wife will need to come to him.

What we tend to forget when seeking God’s will is that He’s already revealed to us many aspects of His will in the Bible. We know it’s His will to marry a fellow believer, we know it’s His will to save sex for marriage, and we know that it’s His will that we stay faithful to our spouse. There are hundreds of commands given in God’s Word for us to follow, not to mention the many principles He gives to guide our decisions.

When we think of finding God’s will, we tend to focus on the specific, personal details of life He has not yet revealed – such as who to marry, what job to take, what house to buy, and what health care options to take. But Abraham focuses first on what He does know, and He trusts God to provide guidance in what he does not yet know. Principle number one is: Act on what you know to be true.

The second principle is: **Seek God's guidance for what you do not yet know.** At this point, Abraham's servant takes center stage in the story. Verses 10-12... "Then the servant left, taking with him ten of his master's camels loaded with all kinds of good things from his master. He set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor. He had the camels kneel down near the well outside the town; it was toward evening, the time the women go out to draw water. Then he prayed, 'Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.'"

When making big decisions people tend to go one of two directions. One way is to rely on their own understanding – they plot and scheme and research and calculate what the best thing to do is instead of saying, "Lord, what do you want?" As James says, "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God."

In one of his books Josh McDowell talks about a father taking his son to an amusement park. In the park was a maze where kids could try to find their way through confusing series of tunnels with high walls on either side. This particular maze was sunk into a pit so parents could see down into the maze from above. From the kid's horizontal perspective, he could not see the way out and ran into one dead end after the other. From the parent's perspective from high above they could easily see the way through the maze. McDowell points out how God can see everything we can't see, and as our Heavenly Father delights in showing us the way. It only makes sense for us to seek His guidance.

Some people go the opposite direction – they pray for God's guidance, and then leave everything in His hands – if God wants to give me a wife, He'll find one for me – if God wants me to have a job, I'll wait for the phone to ring. This approach basically removes any effort on our part, and waits for God to do everything. This may sound spiritual, but walking by faith requires participation and movement on our part. As someone I heard years ago say, "God can't steer a parked car." God expects you to get in the car and start driving and trust Him to steer you where He wants you to go.

This leads us to the third principle for finding God's will: **Explore various options.** After praying for God's guidance, the servant says in verses 13-14... "See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'— let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master."

Some might read this as a green light to lay out their own test for God... "Lord, the next girl that walks through the door wearing a red sweater – I'll take it that she's the one you want me to marry." This may have worked for Abraham's servant, but believers today have two things he didn't have – we have God's Word and the Holy Spirit to guide us. We must rely on these and not presenting tests for God.

Here the servant explores a possible way to discern Isaac's future wife by revealing character. It's hard enough to draw up water for yourself, but to offer to water the servant's ten camels – that required gallons and gallons of water – would show extraordinary hospitality and industriousness. He's not demanding that God do this, but he's exploring a specific test that will reveal her character.

God wants you to step out in faith and explore His will. If you're looking for someone to marry, don't sit at home and wait for the phone to ring – go meet some people and be proactive. If you're looking for a job, fill out some applications and knock on some doors. Explore. Jesus said, "Knock and the door will be opened to you," but He expects you to knock.

The fourth principle of finding God's will is: **Observe how God leads.** Verses 15-21... “Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milkah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor. The woman was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever slept with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again. The servant hurried to meet her and said, ‘Please give me a little water from your jar.’ ‘Drink, my lord,’ she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, ‘I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink.’ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels. Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful.”

This is the exciting part of the faith journey. Once you have prayed for and explored God's will, watch to see how God works through the ordinary circumstances of life. The servant watches Rebekah carefully to see if she is the one God wants for Isaac.

God often reveals His will by closing a door or opening a door. A great example of this is found in Acts 16 where Paul and his missionary team are headed east to preach the gospel but the Holy Spirit keeps them from going. They thought that's where God wanted them to do, but God closed the door. Then Paul receives a vision of a man in Macedonia – to the west – begging him to come spread the gospel there – and Paul concludes that God wants them to go west. Even the great Apostle Paul did not know for certain what God's will was until he stepped out in faith, and when one door closed, God opened up another door and he went through it.

When we were seeking to adopt our second child – to make a very long story short – we were all packed up and ready to adopt a baby boy in Eureka when at the last second the birth mother decided to keep her baby. We thought this was the baby God wanted for us, and we're devastated when the door closed. That very same evening we received a call about a birth mother in Tennessee that was interested in us adopting her baby, and that baby turned out to be Abby. The faith journey is full of twists and turns, opened and closed doors, but that's what faith is all about – watching and depending on God's leading each step of the way.

The fifth principle of finding God's will is: **Seek confirmation from others.** Sometimes we feel so sure about something, but an important part of discovering God's will is seeking the wise counsel of others. After observing Rebekah – and I'm going to summarize here – Rebekah invites the servant to come meet her family, and when he meets her father and brother he gets right to the point. He tells them the whole story of how his master Abraham sent him on this mission, and through divine providence God led him to Rebekah. The servant said, “I believe God led me to the right one. What do you think? Tell me one way or the other.”

The servant won't know for sure if Rebekah is the one unless her father and brother give the okay. If they say “no,” then he'll have to keep looking. If they say “yes,” then he will know. God designs for us to live in community, and others can add insight and perspective that we may be lacking. They may think of an angle we have not yet considered. Proverbs says, “In the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14 KJV). When you sense God leading you in a certain direction, it is wise to bounce it off two or three godly people and see what God says through them.

This is especially true when it comes to marriage. One of the first questions I ask in premarital counseling is, “Are your parents supportive of this marriage?” Your parents know you better than anyone on earth, and they can see things that you might not see. The final call is up to you, but God gives you others to be another set of eyes and ears.

Verses 50-51... “Laban and Bethuel answered, ‘This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master’s son, as the Lord has directed.’” Check, check, check... the servant follows God’s leading each step of the way and is overjoyed at this final confirmation. He wants to leave with Rebekah as soon as possible, but there’s one final person that needs to sign off on the marriage – Rebekah. Her dad and brother look at her and ask, “Will you go with this man?” and she says, “Yes, I will go.” “Yes” is the word every guy wants to hear when he proposes.

Like Abraham many years earlier left everything behind to follow God’s call, Rebekah does the same. She commits herself to a life of faith, not knowing where it might lead or what it might involve. She is willing to become part of God’s plan for Abraham’s people.

The sixth and final principle we glean from this passage on finding God’s will is: **Wait patiently and stay faithful to what God has called you to do.** So often when we’re seeking God’s guidance, we get antsy and impatient and put everything on hold until we get God’s answer. But what I find in this passage is that both Rebekah and Isaac were not preoccupied with finding a mate – they stayed faithful to what God called them to do, and in God’s perfect timing He brought them together.

In verses 60-67 we read... “Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, ‘Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?’ ‘He is my master,’ the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself. Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.”

Rebekah was occupied with her daily chores and had no idea she was being observed – yet her true character was revealed in the ordinary flow of life. Meanwhile, back in the Promised Land, Isaac was also busy with his life – not knowing when the servant would return or if he would bring a wife for him. They both wanted to get married, but they stayed faithful to their present tasks and waited patiently for God’s timing.

Rebekah becomes the new Sarah – the matriarch of the family – and because of her faithfulness to follow God’s leading, she becomes an integral part of God’s plan to save the world through Jesus. And Abraham can now die in peace, knowing that God’s promises will be fulfilled through Isaac and Rebekah.

This was a very hard sermon to put together because there is so much more that could be said about this chapter, but as we close, I want you to think about something you're waiting on the Lord for – some dilemma, some decision where you say, “Lord, I don't know what do to. Please guide me.” Commit yourself to these six principles...

- Act on what you already know to be true. As you're waiting for what God has not yet revealed, obey what He has revealed. As you read God's Word, let it speak directly to you.
- Seek God's guidance – lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.
- Actively explore God's will – step out in faith and trust God to lead.
- As you do, watch for how God leads – observe which doors He closes and which doors He opens.
- Seek counsel from other godly people – there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors.
- While you wait, stay busy serving the Lord. Stay faithful to what He has called you to do in the present and stay open to what He might have you do in the future.

Living by faith is not for the timid – it's not easy to place the future in God's hands – but it's thrilling to watch for how God leads and to know that He is there each step of the way.