



# People of the Book

— Volume 5 —

Elijah    Rahab  
Philemon    Rebekah

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## Introduction

Welcome to the fifth and last volume of *People of the Book*. This popular series has taken refreshing and sometimes unconventional looks at biblical characters—some well-known and others lesser known.

Our goal has been to connect our 21st century hearts and minds with the individuals whose lives are immortalized in the pages of the Bible.

We hope this volume will complete your set, and that you will treasure the lessons you have learned from twenty men and women of the Bible—*People of the Book*.



Greg Albrecht  
Executive Director, Plain Truth Ministries

# Elijah: An All-Too-Human Hero For Our Times

I know failure. You do, too. So did the prophet Elijah. Whoever takes on new challenges will know failure sooner or later. The depression that often follows failure can be immobilizing. When left unattended, depression leads to burnout. Burnout may arise from the stress of overwork, lack of time for oneself, trying to be too much for too many or from callous mistreatment and injustice by others. Whatever the case, some common symptoms are manifest, even in Elijah: severe hurt; feelings of hopelessness; sense of betrayal; inner self-doubt; expressions of anger, bitterness or outrage; often a desire for revenge or self-destruction.

As we examine Elijah's life, we find an all-too-human hero for our times: **1) Times of anticipation and preparation, or Getting READY** (1 Kings 17); **2) Times of confrontation and vindication, or Getting HIGH** (1 Kings 18); **3) Times of deflation and abdication, or Getting DOWN** (1 Kings 19); **4) Times of rejuvenation and consecration, or Getting UP AND ON** (1 Kings 19 with 2 Kings 2).

## I. Getting READY: Times of Anticipation and Preparation

Elijah bursts on the biblical scene to precipitate a conflict with Ahab, king of Israel (1 Kings 17:1). For over 60 years at this point (c. 870 B.C.), Israel has been split into two kingdoms: southern Judah (a.k.a. "Jerusalem") and northern Israel (a.k.a. "Samaria"). Ahab doesn't follow Yahweh, the one true God, any more than his predecessors did. Worse yet, he leads the Israelites into deeper apostasy



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(1 Kings 16:30-33). He promotes worship of false gods, even ritual prostitution and sacrificing children as burnt offerings to idols. Ahab marries the wicked pagan princess Jezebel, who leads him further astray in social injustice and oppression (1 Kings 21-22).

Elijah storms into Ahab's royal fortress in Samaria to announce that God is bringing a drought to Israel because of their unabated apostasy. God's people had violated the covenant they entered into with him, and now they were going to pay the consequence.

How does Elijah get ready for this prophetic work? God took Elijah through a time of preparation to get ready to confront Ahab. This spiritual boot camp takes place at two sites: 1) at *Kerith* (a desolate ravine meaning "to whittle" or "to file down"), Elijah is led by faith and fed by ravens (1 Kings 17:2-6); and, 2) at *Zarephath* (meaning "crucible" or "smelting place"), in Sidon at the heart of Baal country, where he was housed and fed by a widow (1 Kings 17:7-24).

Through these two survival tests, Elijah learns to anticipate and obey whatever the Lord commands. Elijah trusts that God will not only provide for him and protect him, but that God will also use him in a ministry to benefit others. Elijah will need that boot camp-tested faith when confronting Ahab and the whole Baal-worship system on Mount Carmel.

## II. Getting HIGH: Times of Confrontation and Vindication

With three years of faith training, Elijah takes on the king of Israel and all his prophets of Baal. We can learn three principles from this confrontation. First, religious tolerance must be limited. Who or what you worship is a choice that matters—eternally. God tolerates whatever spiritual journey we embark on and patiently gives us multiple chances to get to know him. But this patience is limited. God does not tolerate rival truth-claims; his mercy is meant to lead everyone to repentance. One day we must give an account.

Second, religious "relativism" is forbidden. True spirituality is not "both-and;" it is "either-or!" True spirituality is not "Yahweh plus;" it is "Yahweh only!" You can mix and match foods and clothing from different countries, but this doesn't work with religious doctrines when each make absolute and contradictory truth-claims.

Religious relativism is usually an intellectual cop-out by people who "waver between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21) and thus avoid investigating and deciding about religious truth-claims. As with Yahweh and Baal in Elijah's time, so it is with Jesus and Mohammed or Buddha or Joseph Smith or any other gods and prophets in our times.

Third, religious "triumphalism" is equally out of bounds. Be humble, not haughty, about what God calls you to believe and do. Having the gospel is nothing to boast about; our justification is by grace alone. To choose between different views of God is an aspect of divine grace, not a pretense of human arrogance. Yet getting HIGH atop the mountain and on top of the prophets of Baal, proves to be a short-lived success. Elijah gets DOWN in the valley, DOWN on himself and DOWN on God (see 1 Kings 19).

## III. Getting DOWN: Times of Deflation and Abdication

Queen Jezebel was humiliated and infuriated by this defeat. When told by King Ahab "[Elijah] had killed all the prophets with the sword" (19:1), Jezebel assigns hit men to kill Elijah. When he hears about this, Elijah panics and runs for his life. You need a map to appreciate how far he ran. Not just down the block, across town or down the hill. He ran from the top of the northern kingdom of Israel to the southern tip of Judah—over 90 miles! Just to be safe, he went a day's journey further into the desert (19:3-4).

This is Elijah, the hero who faced down a king, called fire from heaven, wiped out regiments of soldiers, killed 450 prophets of Baal and ran 20 miles in a thunderstorm over some rocky terrain to Jezreel. So why does Elijah

(myself, or anyone in a similar position) become discouraged to the point of contemplating his own demise? *Unrealistic idealism can lead to deflation of emotion and abdication of duty.*

Unrealistic idealism brings on failure and depression whenever our expectations get out of sync with reality. Elijah is a case in point: “He prayed that he might die, and said, ‘I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors’” (19:4-5). Was he thinking that victory over King Ahab on Mount Carmel would mean that Queen Jezebel and Jezreel would convert to Yahweh, too? Or could “ancestors” refer to all the prophets who preceded him? No prophet had ever turned Israel back to God for very long. Israel had been in a spiritual decline for over a century. Who was Elijah to think he could change Baal culture in one dramatic event, or even with years of work? Elijah fails to recognize the depth of Israel’s problems, so when braced by reality, he collapses.

#### IV. Getting UP: Times of Rejuvenation and Consecration

When depressed, our exhausted bodies beg for sleep. An angel of God touches Elijah, offering him food, water and rest twice (19:5-7). But the messenger asks him to “get UP” to eat and move on. That is, God responds to our failure and defeat with compassion at the point of need. God does NOT ask for five years of penitent service to get back in his good graces. God accepts his servants based on his provision, not our performance—on his mercy, not our mission.

At this point, Elijah still prefers sleep avoidance to actively trusting God. So he runs “forty days and forty nights” until he finds just the right cave, ostensibly to get away from God. But by this time, he’s on Mount Sinai! God once again asks, “What are you doing here?” (19:8-9). We can see the obvious point: *Elijah, if you believed I was powerful, if you believed I had the situation in control, would you be here? No! You’d be in Jezreel, remembering who I am.*

But Elijah has lost confidence in God. God summons Elijah for an appointment to correct the prophet’s limited view of the Almighty. Elijah may have expected God in the whirlwind, earthquake or fire. But God reveals himself instead in a “gentle whisper,” asking, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (19:11-13). Elijah’s messiah-complex kicks in, but God reassures him of 7,000 other faithful followers of Yahweh, and he gives Elijah another assignment (19:14-21). Elijah is to mentor and anoint Elisha as his successor, who would eventually do twice the miracles that Elijah did (see 2 Kings 2-13). For Elijah, that means getting up, getting on with God and passing on the baton to the next generation.

For the next ten years, the focus of Elijah’s ministry is on God’s people, especially Elisha and the “company of the prophets,” whom he has developed to multiply his work and replace him when he is gone (2 Kings 2:1-7). Elisha is the God-picked successor and Elijah’s spiritual son. Elisha picks up the mantle of ministry left behind by Elijah (2:11-14). A focus on people is a risky but fruitful investment. For Elijah and Elisha, this proves to be an extended time of rejuvenation and consecration that is mutually beneficial. So also with us. Seek out someone to mentor, or to be mentored by. With this antidote to depression, you’ll get UP and move on.

You may think Elijah is so unique that it would be foolish to apply the details of his life or expect a parallel experience of your own. But “Elijah was a man just like us” (James 5:17). That is, God teaches us to pray and trust and witness in much the same way he worked through Elijah. The “spirit of Elijah” inspires believers in the New Testament era and beyond to do Elijah-like miracles (see Matthew 11:14; 17:10-12; 27:47-49; and parallels; also Revelation 11:3-10). God wants you to personally trust the only true God, to know his sustaining presence, to grow through failure, to be uplifted by his messengers and to encourage others to grow in faith.

—Originally published May 2002

## Rahab: From Harlot to Hero

**B**y the grace of God, a harlot of Jericho became a hero of faith. The details of her notorious life may be simply told, but raise many questions about her real character. Rahab is considered an innkeeper by some (Josephus and other Jewish commentators), but a harlot by others (see *NIV* text note at Joshua 2:1).

The difference is subtle but not substantive. Women who owned inns often had sexual relations with patrons seeking more than a night's rest. Rahab was one such woman—at least the authors of Hebrews (11:31) and James (2:25) thought so. And Joshua's troops, having spared her family from Jericho's destruction, then placed her outside the holy camp of Israel (Joshua 6:23), perhaps signaling her unclean status as a harlot.

If she was a woman of ill repute, what about the intentions of the two spies from Israel? Were they seeking a night's rest—or something more risqué? It could be argued that her character was of no import to them, except as a cover for two strangers entering Jericho on business. Perhaps the house of the harlot was sought out for its strategic location, high on the outer wall. Archaeologists have discovered that two thick walls standing 12 to 15 feet apart ringed Jericho. Rahab's house would have been nestled between the two perimeter walls (Joshua 2:15), perhaps with a veranda, but certainly with a rooftop view so that the fortifications of Jericho could be strategically sized up. This information was more vital to the spies than the strength or position of the walls.

### Rahab's Providential Role

The name Rahab means “pride” and may indicate the worldliness of her pagan parentage or livelihood. But she herself would go on to be-



ILLUSTRATION BY JODY EASTMAN

come an ancestor to the Jewish Messiah. *How could that be?* you ask. The lineage to Jesus the Christ can be traced through Prince Salmon (a.k.a. *Sala* or *Salma*), allegedly one of the two spies who appealed to her for help. While the identity of the two spies is not given in the text, we may reasonably guess that one was Salmon of the tribe of Judah. His father Nahshon was the leader of that tribe during earlier wilderness wanderings (Numbers 1:7; 2:3). Since Judah was the leading tribe (10:14) and since Nahshon had died in the wilderness, we may assume that his son Salmon took his place.

In either event, the New Testament records that Rahab married a man named Salmon and became the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth, whose son Obed gave birth to Jesse, the father of David...to Jesus the ultimate son of David (Matthew 1:5). *But why did God have mercy on her, deliver her from Israel's attack on Jericho, transform her from a harlot, even bring her into the lineage of the Messiah in the first place?*

### Saving Faith

The answer lies in her extraordinary faith, or better said, her faith in an extraordinary God. God knows that strong faith can grow in a heart as sinful as Rahab's. He also knows that faith can grow in a city as sinful as Jericho (a.k.a. the "moon city" dedicated to worshipping the Canaanite moon-god). And because of her exemplary faith—a faith that is at once *saving*, *singular*, *steady*, *sacrificial* and *sanctifying*—we can likewise grow in that faith!

Rahab's faith is a *saving* faith in two respects—temporally and eternally. Her temporal salvation is obvious from the fact that her life was spared from the Israelite sword. Her eternal salvation is inferred from the book of Hebrews' "Hall of Faith" (chapter 11, where everyone listed is saved by faith) and from the letter of James, which cited Rahab as a sterling example of faith. "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when

she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" (James 2:25).

As an innkeeper, Rahab would have been well informed of outside events, as travelers (then as now) talk of their journeys and experiences. Reports of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea some 40 years prior had come to her. So had news of the more recent conquests by Israel of the two Amorite kings. While word of these events had spread through Jericho and frightened the people, fright is not faith.

To a well-founded fear of Israel's God, Rahab added a bit of reasoning. She concluded what other equally fearful people missed—that if Israel had enjoyed such miraculous victories, then their god must be the true God. "For the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11). Rahab's journey from fear to reasonable belief was not complete without acting on that knowledge with works. That final step of faith is evidenced when she gave lodging to the spies, protected them from discovery and sent them off safely to fulfill their secret mission.

### Singular Faith

That only Rahab and her household were delivered among a multitude of Canaanites is also an example of *singular* faith. People in Jericho had every reason to believe that, if their city should be stormed, they would all be put to death. Yet not one asked for mercy, except this woman who had been a harlot. Presumably, if there had been other righteous people, God would have spared them as well. Perhaps with enough righteous people, God would have even spared Jericho, as may be inferred from Abraham's prayer on behalf of Gomorrah, another condemned city (Genesis 18).

Rahab's house stood alone upon the wall, a solitary fragment amid a universal wreck; she and her household were the only ones saved. It's easy to believe in God if others around you believe likewise, but it's altogether different to believe a thing by your lonesome, when no one else thinks as you do. Those who are the solitary



champions of a righteous cause, especially when the enemy outflanks you, are to be commended for having singular faith like that of Rahab.

### Steady Faith

Furthermore, Rahab's faith was a *steady* faith that stood firm under pressure. Imagine what great pressure the king of Jericho must have brought when he confronted her with a search warrant for the two spies last seen visiting her place. "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land" (Joshua 2:3).

Pressure to cave in or give up the faith may have also come from within her own household. They must have heard, as Rahab did, the rumors of bloody wars fought and won by Israel over other Canaanite cities. Later, at the time of Israel's attack, and the seven-day build-up to that attack, Rahab's household of faith must have been tested by all those annoying, noisy elements meant to confuse and intimidate them. But Rahab never wavered. She obediently kept her father, mother, brothers and sisters in the house. Her faith was steady and stable enough to withstand pressures from without and from within.

### Sacrificial Faith

Rahab not only hid the spies (under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof), but also lied about where they were and sent the king's army on a wild goose chase (Joshua 2:4-8). Such deviousness put her at great risk. If caught lying, she would die a traitor's death. Even though she ran that risk, Rahab's primary concern was to save the two strangers, God's ambassadors. This shows her faith to be a *sacrificial* faith—that is, she was not afraid to lay down her life for her family, but also for those in the family of faith.

So impressed were the two spies by her courageous act of faith that they proclaimed their gratitude and kept their sworn commitment to this woman upon their return to overtake the city. "Our lives for your lives!" the men

assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.... The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent" (Joshua 2:14; 6:17).

You may think Rahab's lie was anything but an act of faith, that it was rather an act of survival. If so, consider this counterpoint: *Are we lying when, before we go on vacation, we have delivery of our mail and newspapers suspended and activate light timers in our homes? After all, this preemptive action is meant to deceive would-be thieves who might otherwise break into our homes and plunder our possessions. If deception is acceptable in order to safeguard our petty possessions why isn't deception acceptable, even honorable, in order to safeguard lives?*

### Sanctifying Faith

Finally, Rahab's was a *sanctifying* faith. That is, faith played a significant role in transforming Rahab from a harlot to a hero. I do not believe that Rahab continued to be a harlot after she had faith in the God of Israel. I believe that prostitutes can come to faith, as I personally have seen such and Paul claims as much (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Rahab may, or may not, have been practicing her sexual wiles at the time the men came to her inn for a night's lodging, though the moniker "harlot" still stuck to her. But we can be certain she was not still prostituting herself after confessing her fear of the Lord.

That such a transformation took place we may infer from the biblical doctrine of justification by faith (Romans 4, James 2). *While we are saved by faith alone* (so says Paul), *the faith that saves is never alone* (but is accompanied by works, says James). That is—true faith is both *saving* and *sanctifying*. James asserts that Rahab demonstrated such faith. May you grow in your own similarity to Rahab when it comes to faith.

—Originally published January 2002



# Philemon: In the Grip of God's Grace

The letter that bears Philemon's name is a mere 330 words in Greek, just a few sentences longer than Lincoln's 276-word Gettysburg address. But this comparable, liberating document identifies a double bind we often experience.

Philemon faced the contradictory demand of economic self-interest and Christian brotherhood; the double bind of law and grace. All who have ever had to choose between legal rights and Christian duties will identify with him. Philemon's story can help to release you into the grip of God's grace.

## To Forgive a Loss

Philemon enjoyed the rights of slaveholder and landowner in the Lycus valley, near Ephesus, in Asia Minor (now modern-day Turkey). Among his household of slaves was Onesimus (meaning "useful"). For some reason—out of poverty or to take advantage of Christian kindness, we don't know—Onesimus stole money from his master and benefactor. He then took off—1,000 miles to Rome.

In Rome, Onesimus would start a new life as a freedman, perhaps under a new guise or false identity papers. But somewhere on the streets of Rome, this fugitive met some Christians who introduced him to the apostle Paul (in prison). Paul and his associates evangelized him, disciplined him and confirmed in Onesimus a new identity and a new Master, Christ the Savior.



ILLUSTRATION BY JODY EASTMAN

They also prepared Onesimus to return to his former master, Philemon. A runaway slave, if caught, had to be returned to his former master for restitution and retribution. That could cost a slave his freedom, or worse, his life. At the very least, Philemon had the option of auctioning Onesimus off to recover the stolen money and lost property. Those who sheltered runaway slaves (even Paul) could also be held financially liable.

Assuming Philemon would be unforgiving toward his runaway slave, perhaps even toward Paul, the apostle wrote a compassionate and conciliatory letter on behalf of Onesimus, who was now a brother in Christ to his former master. This appeal to the gospel put Philemon in the economic bind of having to forgive not only Onesimus' sin, but also forgo the economic gain that slaves were to their masters.

Philemon himself had already heard the gospel from Paul, most likely in Ephesus at the lecture hall of Tyrannus where Paul preached for two years—"so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:9-10). Whenever or however Philemon came to Christ, we know that he started, or at least hosted, a house church at Laodicea, near Ephesus.

Upon receiving this letter from Paul, Philemon would have read aloud his greeting to this house church, which was led by himself, sister Apphia and brother Archippus (verses 1-3).

But he might have stopped reading aloud as soon as he felt Paul's knife-like argument sticking and twisting in his ribs.

How soon he may have felt that emotional stab is anyone's guess. But we who know the end of the letter from the beginning can readily see Paul buttering Philemon up for an arm-twisting, gut-wrenching appeal on Onesimus' behalf.

Paul prays for Philemon and brags about him, praising his great ministry, good works and loving character (verses 4-7). Then, in verse 8,

Paul begins to use a cutting, knife-like argument. The grip of grace tightens around Philemon's heart.

Paul is saying, in effect, "I'd rather keep Onesimus here with me; he is my very heart that I'm sending to you. By the way, if he has wronged you in any way, I mean, if he owes you anything, charge it to my account. My MasterCard number is..."

Paul hooks Philemon with a not-so-subtle reminder (in effect, cashing in an I.O.U.): "Any debt that I might owe you on Onesimus' behalf is far outweighed by the fact that you owe your very life to me" (verse 19, paraphrased).

### The Value of Theological Reflection

Before delivering that decisive right hook, Paul engages in a bit of subtle theological reflection. He reflects on God's purpose behind the turn of events that brought Onesimus from Philemon to Paul...from Asia to Europe...from slavery to freedom...from sin to Christ...and now all the way back to Philemon.

The reflections turn on a simple phrase, "Perhaps..." (verses 15-16). Theological reflection that brings truth to life, and life to truth, is an effective way to study the Bible.

We bring insight to and from the Bible when we reflect on what God is doing in our own life—in our career or marriage decisions; in the circumstances of our jobs or families; in our struggles with bondage or fear; in our journey of faith and doubt. We do the same in this series when we reflect theologically with *People of the Book*.

When we place ourselves in Scripture, we go into the same predicaments as these Bible characters, then we step back to look deeper. We can look from the outside or from above, as with a narrator's or after-the-fact perspective. You will then see, reflected in the Bible and in life, the thing that God intends for you. And we ask ourselves, as Paul did with Philemon, "Perhaps...?"

In sending Onesimus back to Philemon, not as a slave but as a brother (verse 16), what is Paul really saying between the lines? Perhaps this: “I led you to Christ in Ephesus. You are my spiritual son. You went on to help establish a house church in Lycus Valley near Laodicea and Colosse. Twelve years later, in Rome, I led your slave to Christ. That makes the three of us brothers, one family; so treat him accordingly.”

In other words, do what Jesus would have you do.

Paul emphasizes this expectation by revealing that he plans to inspect: “Fix up that guest room for me. I hope to come and see how things are working out between you two” (verse 22, paraphrased).

### **Gospel of Grace vs. Tradition of Law**

There is another bind that Philemon, as man about town and steeped in law and tradition, might well have experienced. Along with this love letter hand-delivered from Paul, some bad news was traveling down the same road from Rome to Laodicea. Good news travels fast, but scuttlebutt travels even faster.

Imagine this scene: Philemon is down at the Laodicean town square, perhaps sitting in a Roman bath with other landowners from the Lycus Valley. One fellow starts in on him: “Hey, Phil, I hear that runaway slave of yours is actually returning. What are you going to do with him?” Another chimes in, “Listen, Phil, you’d better do the right thing according to the law and execute this slave. You will at least obey the law, won’t you?”

The law, as interpreted by Aristotle centuries before, clarified what was required and/or permitted in such situations. Aristotle (born 384 B.C.) had argued in *Politics* that slaves were not people, they were property. A slave who stole money was branded on the head with a hot iron. One could go to City Hall and buy “manumission papers”—freedom or redemption

of the slave—but this was rarely done.

Philemon was caught in a double bind. His fellow landowners and slaveholders knew it. If word got out that all any slave had to do to get free was to steal money, run away, get converted and come back as a “Christian brother,” soon there would be no more slaves on any homestead in the Lycus Valley.

“No more slaves” meant no livelihood as a farmer-rancher. That would mean foreclosure. On the other hand, Philemon also felt duty bound to do the right thing by Paul, his trusted friend and the one to whom he “owed his very self” (meaning his salvation).

Which way would Philemon lean? Which side would he alienate? Who would he appease?

Philemon could have started a church for former slaves on the premise that one should not mix different social and racial groups. Or Philemon and Onesimus could have integrated their house church in accord with Paul’s theology that, in Christ, “there is neither slave or free” (Galatians 3:28). Either way, the next record of Onesimus is recorded by Ignatius of Antioch, whose little-known letter, written in A.D. 110 to a “Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus,” survives among the early Church Fathers. Could the city where Paul began evangelizing in a rented theater some 57 years earlier have grown to the point where it called a former slave and intercontinental refugee to fill this most prestigious pulpit?

Philemon, the man who had a role in making or breaking Onesimus, represents a triumph of grace over law in the resolution of his personal dilemma. He speaks to all who must reconcile with an estranged partner in business, in marriage or in church.

Write your own ending to the unfinished Philemon story by breaking down the walls that divide you and your brothers. “Perhaps” you can lift up the name of someone “useful,” a modern-day Onesimus.

—Originally published July 1998





ILLUSTRATIONS BY JODY EASTMAN

## Rebekah: The Original Jewish Mother

**T**he lineage and legacy of Rebekah can be told simply enough: Rebekah was the granddaughter of Nahor and Milcah, the daughter of Bethuel, the sister of Laban, the wife of Isaac, the daughter-in-law of Abraham and Sarah and the mother of Jacob and Esau. Through Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, Rebekah is grandmother to all the Israelite tribes, including Judah, and thus an ancestor of Jesus Christ. However, on closer inspection, Rebekah is an enigma who defies easy typecasting. As a great woman of faith, she is worthy of emulation. Rebekah also represents the age-old conundrum of whether noble ends ever justify immoral means.

### Rebekah's Courtship: The Map to Finding the Right Mate

For those who seek God's will in a marriage partner—for themselves or a loved one—the providential circumstances that brought Isaac and Rebekah together will be of some interest. Father Abraham lived among pagan foreigners and wished for his son Isaac to marry among his own people. So Abraham sent his chief servant back to Ur (modern-day Iraq) to find an appropriate wife for his son (Genesis 24:1-9).

As he was praying, Abraham's servant finds a courteous, kind woman (Rebekah) who shows great hospitality. Rebekah draws water, not only for the servant, but also for his ten camels. A camel, tired from a long journey, may guzzle and store ten gallons at a time (that's five 2-gallon buckets of water) before its thirst is satisfied. For all ten camels, that's an exhausting one-

woman bucket brigade of 50 trips, dips and lifts! Beyond that gesture, she gives everyone lodging for the night. Not only is she kind, unselfish, outgoing and hardworking, but Rebekah is also said to be “beautiful” and a “virgin” (24:16-20).

She put herself out for no apparent gain. Yet unknown to her, Rebekah is God’s chosen hand-maiden, as her humble and extraordinary kindness indicates the divine favor that Abraham’s servant had been praying for (24:12-14). Though she cares well for strangers, Rebekah is no stranger to Abraham’s clan, but the granddaughter of his brother Nahor (24:47; see 11:28). That makes her Isaac’s second cousin.

When told about Abraham’s request for a wife for his son Isaac and God’s guiding, Rebekah’s father Bethuel and her brother Laban both agree God’s will for Rebekah was to be that chosen bride (24:22-57). Still, they both let the final decision be hers (24:58). Obedient to God and trusting of her family’s recommendations, Rebekah leaves her comfort zone in Ur and travels 500 miles (and several weeks) to Canaan to marry Isaac (24:61). No doubt apprehensive about her decision, she acts decisively on faith in God’s goodness. This ability to make quick, firm decisions is normally an asset, but would one day cause great heartache.

Though conceived in heaven, their marriage is carried out in two willing hearts and families. Theirs is not love at first sight, but true love borne out of commitment. The Isaac-Rebekah wedding announcement concludes: “Then the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Isaac brought Rebekah 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” (24:66-67).

Looking to marry the right mate? It takes more than a map or dating service. Try prayer. Trust family referrals and intermediaries (divine and human). Go to those watering holes where believers hang out. Look for someone humbly

serving others with no thought of personal return. Lord knows what marriage offers may result from specific prayer and serving others.

### **Rebekah’s Covenant: The Key to Building a Strong Love Relationship**

Well into her marriage, Rebekah is still a stunning beauty, a fact acknowledged by all around. Even King Abimilech admired and coveted her for himself, until he saw Isaac playfully caressing Rebekah as only a devoted husband could (Genesis 26:8-10).

Tragically, that romantic element too often fades as marriages mature into their second and third decade. We slip into careless decay and slovenly habits. The beauty once cultivated to win the other’s affection is taken for granted and forgotten. Not Rebekah or Isaac—they have eyes only and always for each other. Their playful courtship results in a romantic, lengthy and monogamous marriage that God blesses. However she did it—by godly discernment, feminine wiles or personal discipline—Rebekah kept her man attracted to her for life. Sadly, before this couple took center stage in biblical history, multiple marriage partners were the norm.

Isaac and Rebekah practice another key principle of loving relationships: When one is down the other can lift the person up. At the outset of their marriage, a loving Rebekah comforted Isaac, who was still mourning Sarah’s death. Later in their marriage, a childless Rebekah needed comforting and reassurance from Isaac, who prayed for her. Yet even with Isaac’s prayer, it took 20 years of marriage before Rebekah would have her children (25:19,26).

### **Rebekah’s Charge: The Family Legacy That Leaves Much to Be Desired**

In due time God blessed this childless couple with twin boys. While in Rebekah’s womb (and throughout their lives!), these two boys engaged in a troublesome tug of war. So the pregnant Rebekah prayed to God, “Why is this happening

to me ?” To which the Lord replied, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (25:22-23).

God also blessed Isaac and Rebekah with powerful family wealth—mostly crops, flocks, herds and water wells (26:12-15). Yet these two partners let that wealth come between them, as



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their two sons fight to see who gets it. Jacob wants the lion's share of the family legacy, but Esau (as the older brother) stood to inherit the most.

Fearing he was dying, Isaac calls for Esau to give him the special blessing meant only for the firstborn son. First, though, Isaac asks Esau to go outside and hunt wild game and to prepare it for Isaac. The blessing would follow. Rebekah hears Isaac's plan and is distraught.

Why? Because some 30-40 years earlier, when the twins were struggling in her womb, God had told Rebekah that the younger son would establish the greater nation. Moreover, as the boys had grown up, Rebekah observed Jacob's fine character and studious nature. She knows that only Jacob is worthy of the legacy of Abraham and Isaac. So Rebekah conceives a devious lie, ostensibly to fulfill God's will. Jacob will go to the barn, kill a goat, disguise himself as Esau and go to Isaac to secure the blessing (27:1-24).

By contrast, the nearly blind Isaac seems sadly oblivious to God's revealed will that Jacob should receive the preferred blessing, yet proceeds “by faith” with regard to both sons (27:25-29; Hebrews 11:20). This beloved patriarch and matriarch are now working against each other. They lack what we might call *good couple communication* and *parent effectiveness training*. Isaac and Rebekah make the same mistake many of us do: They choose favorites among their children—something all parents should guard against.

Rebekah is the more decisive and insightful of the two parents, so her favorite son gets his way over the other. But Jacob fears being found out, “What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing” (Genesis 27:12). Here again, even in her disobedience, Rebekah is instinctively unselfish and protective of her own kin. So she takes the rap: “My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say” (27:13).

Esau flies into a rage when he realizes Jacob and Rebekah have betrayed him and Isaac. He threatens to kill the supplanter for stealing the blessing and inheritance that normally goes to the firstborn. Again Rebekah takes charge. She pleads with Isaac to send Jacob away to Uncle Laban's home in Haran, which she fully expects will be a safe, temporary stay (27:41-45). When Jacob departs and Esau pursues, little does this dear Jewish mother know that she'll never see either son again.



As God would have it, the crude deception and bold lies devised by Rebekah actually worked. Yet when people seek to fulfill God's will in their own way, there is inevitably a price to pay. A lifetime of faithful obedience is surely commendable, but that only makes one moment of sinful deception all the more lamentable. Or, as another pundit puts it, "One hour of sin in the heat of the night, can never be covered by decades of obedience and walking in the light." Even the best of saints have a sinful nature that, if yielded to, can bring heartache and discipline from the Lord.

### **Rebekah's Choice: The Lie for a Greater Good Brings Great Suffering**

The Rebekah story also illustrates the morally complicated decisions that confront all of us. Often, like Rebekah, we forge ahead without much reflection, confident we are right. Like Rebekah, we may have good intentions and noble goals. Yet we all suffer consequences, since even the most justified end cannot erase the path taken. In the long run, God's sovereign mercy prevailed through Rebekah's devious plan (Romans 9:10-13). A noble end, or divine purpose, is effectively served by immoral means. So is she *righteous*, or *cursed*, for the choice she made to lie and cheat? Though her actions were themselves immoral, it seems the end would justify the means. *But was there another way? We'll never know.*

Rebekah is a woman of godly character who suffers terribly for "helping" God in her own way. Consequently, she never sees either son again for as long as she lives. One son marries outside the family of faith, a source of unending grief to his parents (Genesis 36:2-3). Rebekah's own marriage is hereafter tainted by her bold sin, as well. Life is full of difficult choices and natural consequences. Our patriarchs and matriarchs did not always make decisions above reproach. Neither do we.

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- To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ through the mass media.
- To challenge non-believers to investigate the claims of Christianity.
- To encourage nominal Christians to come to saving faith in their Lord and Savior.
- To provide Christian instruction and resources that will inspire, edify and uplift.

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We believe in one eternal, triune God in three co-essential, yet distinct Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, begotten of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, the Son of God and Lord of all, worthy of worship, honor and reverence, who died for our sins, was raised bodily from the dead, ascended to heaven, and will come again as King of kings.

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