

Who Chooses our Marriage Partner? And How?

Genesis 24, Judges 1:12-15; Ruth 3:8-11

Genesis 24. Marriage: who picks our marriage partner, and on what basis? Our answer: we pick our own partners, mostly on the basis of the love we feel before we marry. God has no preference for this answer. Our dating and courtship process seems not to have occurred to him.

I don't expect to change how we choose marriage partners. But since we follow God, we need to see our society's limitations more clearly, and see God's priorities.

Here is where this will end up: (1) What we feel toward each other before we marry is not important in the Bible, not important to God. How we treat each other after we marry is everything. Can I be kind, respectful, & forgiving to this person every day? That is the question.

(2) Don't choose your partner on your own. What do your parents say, what does your believing family say? Involve the people you respect, and listen to them.

(3) Marrying the person that's perfect for us is not that important. There are no perfect spouses. Picking the right person is not what makes a marriage long and stable. The key is, will I love this person after we're married? Kind, forgiving, respectful, every day?

Three choosing stories: a wife for Isaac, a husband for Aksah, and a husband for Ruth. First, A wife for Isaac.

Gen 24:1-14 *Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. ² He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. ³ 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, ⁴ but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac."*

⁵ *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?"*

⁶ *"Make sure that you do not take my son back there," Abraham said. ⁷ "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. ⁸ 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." ⁹ So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore an oath to him concerning this matter.*

Note, the woman can refuse. The servant assumes this, Abraham assumes this. It is the one thing that could go wrong with this. If the woman does not want to come, it won't happen.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Then he prayed, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. ¹³ See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ 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."

This is not an empty test. The woman who does will has good character. She is hospitable to strangers, and she will work hard, ten camels take a lot of water, and she will work hard out of kindness not duty. Abe's servant is a wise man, which is why Abe trusted him with this.

So Rebekah came, and passed this test wonderfully. So the servant told this story to her father and her brother, Bethuel and Laban. This is what they said (vv50-51): *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."* But, will she herself agree?

Gen 24:57-60 *Then they said, "Let's call the young woman and ask her about it." So they called Rebekah and asked her, "Will you go with this man?" "I will go," she said. So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way, along with her nurse and Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies."*

Who picked Isaac's wife? Isaac's father's trusted servant did. Isaac had never seen Rebekah, and Rebekah had never seen Isaac. Rebekah could have said "no" ahead of time, Isaac did not have that option. He would take whoever the servant brought.

The servant certainly wanted what was best for Isaac. And Rebekah's father and brother listened carefully to the servant, they certainly want the best for Rebekah. They paid attention to the character of the people involved, and to God. And God was in it. God likes this story. God does not think what we do now is better.

A husband for Aksah (Judges 1:12-15)

The writer of Judges copied this story from Joshua 15, word for word. It is an important story. There are many bad things between fathers and daughters in Judges. This story is at the beginning of Judges, copied it from Joshua 15, to show how fathers and daughters treat each other when Israel follows the true God. The others stories show life after Israel left God.

And Caleb said, "I will give my daughter Aksah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath Sepher."

Some are offended at how Caleb treats Aksah, making her a prize to whoever, but think a bit. Caleb's role in that society is to find a good husband for his daughter. Like Abraham's servant's test for Isaac's wife, the kindness and work at the well, Caleb's test is pretty good.

First, whoever captures this place is doing God's work, God wants the Canaanites off that land. This man, whoever he is, is doing God's work. And he needs to be brave, he needs to be "a go-getter," as we say. He will not do this alone, so he needs to have the loyalty of other men, and be able to lead them. And, he has to want Aksah a lot, because he's risking his life for to marry her.

All told, that's not bad, is it. There are men in our day, with married daughters, who would trade in their son-in-law for one like this. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe Aksah agreed with the whole thing.

¹³ Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took [Kiriath Sepher]; so Caleb gave his daughter Aksah to him in marriage. ¹⁴ One day when she came to Othniel, he urged her to ask her father for a field. When she got off her donkey, Caleb asked her, "What can I do for you?" ¹⁵ She replied, "Do me a special favor. Since you have given me land in the Negev, give me also springs of water." So Caleb gave her the upper and lower springs.

Othniel, the new husband, knew that father Caleb would do what Aksah asked, and Othniel was right. When Aksah got to her father Caleb, she got off her donkey. Why is that included? It is a sign of respect. She will not sit above her father when she talks to him. First, she gets off her donkey to show him respect.

How does the conversation begin? *Caleb asked her, "What can I do for you?"* Those are the first words spoken. Read the rest of Judges, and listen to what men say to or about their daughters. Caleb opens, Caleb put himself at his daughter's service, that how it starts.

Caleb had already given his daughter some land. Don't miss that. But it had no springs. She'd like also some land that has springs, a water supply. Presumably one set of springs would have been enough, but Caleb gives her two sets. He's generous.

This is why I am pretty sure Aksah agreed to this. Caleb does not seem like a father who would do this if Aksah objected. Gen 24: Abraham and his servant both assumed the woman would have a choice, and Rebekah's father and brother also assumed that it was her choice.

Caleb sounds like a dad who will do anything his daughter wants! This is certainly a patriarchal society, but don't you believe everything they tell you about OT patriarchal society. This is a story about how fathers and daughters treat each other when Israel serves the true God.

Aksah got a good man for a husband, but she did not choose him. She got the man who passed her father's test, and she and her father loved and respected each other. God likes this story.

Whatever God has in mind for a godly marriage, to begin marriage as Isaac began his to Rebekah, or Aksah began hers to Othniel, is as good as beginning as any. However much we need to adjust our thinking to make room for this, let's adjust.

I heard this week about a young man from India who works in Winnipeg. His family has arranged a wife for him, and they are to be married soon, and he is really looking forward to this. For him, it all begins with the wedding.

In Deuteronomy 24, Moses says this: *If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.* They just got married. Let them have fun for a year. We think an arranged marriage means a dull marriage, but that our prejudice.

Some of them were unkind and disastrous, but so are some of ours, where we choose our own.

A Husband for Ruth (Ruth 3:7-11)

Naomi lived in Moab. Her husband died. She had two sons, who got married, and those two young men also died. Naomi moved back to Judah with her daughter in law Ruth. Ruth was taking care of her mother in law Naomi.

When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled [Boaz]; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

“Spread the corner of your garment over me.” That's a marriage proposal. Ruth was asking Boaz to marry her. “Since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” Boaz was related to Naomi's dead husband, and he had a legal duty to help Naomi's family.

So Ruth was really saying this: “Marry me to help me take care of my mother in law Naomi.” “Marry me to help me take care of Naomi.”

Did Ruth marry for love? Yes. Love for Boaz? No. Who then? Naomi. She wanted to marry Boaz because she loved Naomi, and Boaz was prosperous and kind and would help her take care of Naomi. Boaz understood all this immediately.

“The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have already been kind to Naomi, but now you even want to marry for her sake. This is a greater kindness.

You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. That is, the Lord bless you, your are not marrying a poor young man which would be marrying out of love (Boaz is older). You are not marrying a rich young man, which would be just to be prosperous yourself. You want to marry an older man, so you can help Naomi.

And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. He agrees, they marry, and together help Naomi. This is not a lesser marriage. This is not misusing marriage. Ruth and Boaz have already been shown in the book of Ruth to be kind and respectful people, and to be faithful to God. We have a romantic ideal, and this marriage does not match that.

But our romantic ideal is not working. More marriages end in unhappily than ever. And every couple that stays married for a long time knows that their being together has really nothing to do with the romantic ideal.

Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* 200 years ago in England. It is a good love story, I have read it twice. You can tell when you read this story that marrying for love is kind of a new thing in upper class England at that time, but Jane Austen certainly thinks that is the way to go.

But Jane Austen's novels and Walt Disney's movies have carried the day, and thanks to them and their followers this is what we all assume to be right and pure. But before Jane Austen's day, marrying for love before the people were married was considered foolish. A short happy beginning to the marriage and then long misery.

What have we learned from our stories? Isaac did not choose Rebekah, and Rebekah did not choose Isaac, although she could have said “no,” but only before she saw him. Fathers and brother and trusted servant did most of the choosing. And did so carefully.

Aksah did not choose Othniel, though I am pretty sure she could have said “no” before Caleb announced his offer. Othniel did choose Aksah, and probably knew her a bit. Caleb did the choosing for Aksah. And did so carefully.

Ruth choose Boaz, no father around. Naomi the mother in law had already said Boaz was a good man, though. Boaz did meet Naomi's approval. Ruth choose Boaz because she loved Naomi, and Ruth knew her marrying Boaz would be good for Naomi who she loved. Ruth was completely open about this when she proposed.

To be fair, young Jacob choose Rachel for love. Jacob worked for her father Laban, saw her around, fell deeply in love, and asked to marry her, and did so. God does not object to marrying for love. It is one of many ways to choose a marriage partner.

Here are some problems with our dating and courtship model, and some suggestions.

(1) Both of us want to attract the other, so we present ourselves as nicely as possible. We groom our appearance, and groom our behaviour, so the other person will want us. Both people want to find out what the other person is really like, but neither of us are actually offering that.

So, listen to other people, meet the other family, listen to your parents, listen to your believing community, *don't make the selecting process too private.*

(2) When we are in love, we don't think well. It is not a good state of mind to make an important choice. So, listen to other people, listen to your own parents and family, and your community.

(3) Our dating and courtship process puts the couple in regular sexual temptation. The Bible says to flee sexual immorality, and our process invites immorality. For genuine followers of God this is a big problem. The Bible never heard of our dating and courtship model, for this reason.

Biblically it is foolish, pure and simple, to put an unmarried believing couple, who are clearly attracted to each other, in that situation. I doubt we can change this society. But it is unfair to couples who want to live in God's ways. Sermons about purity are not the answer.

Let's not start dating and courtship until we are ready to be married, that is, until we are ready to treat a person every day with kindness, respect, and forgiveness. Let's not start just because we are attracted, when we know we are not ready to be married.

Let's listen to other people's views of our suitability to each other, and our own suitability for marriage. And our weddings could be a lot simpler. Even big weddings could be a lot simpler. We're still watching too much Walt Disney. We want Disney romance more than the Lord's purity, and we help our children in this.

Summary: The question is not, do I feel the true love before we marry? Nor: have I picked the perfect person for me? The question is: Will I show marriage love after we marry?

- (1) Let's not start dating and courtship just because we're attracted. Let's not begin until we're ready to be married. We the older ones have to help our younger people with this.
- (2) Listen to family and others about your suitability for each other. Listen.
- (3) Shorter courtships.
- (4) Simpler weddings.

God is on our side here. He's not trying to make us miserable. God wants long loyal affectionate marriages. Let's listen to him.

Amen.