

A Promise-Shaped Plan

Grace Fellowship | Cory Hughes | Genesis 24:1-9

If you've got your Bibles, turn them to Genesis 24 and, man, if the sermon is no good to you this morning, isn't it just wonderful that we just got to sing about a God who redeems sinners? Like, let's just take rest in that and that is enough this morning. But I hope that Genesis 24 is going to give us even more of His glory and goodness and reveal that to us.

So as you're turning there, fun fact: if you're ever on Jeopardy, what is the longest chapter in Genesis? That is Genesis 24. It's 67 verses that tell one story, one beautiful story. We've decided to take three weeks to cover this story and I'll explain how we're going to do that in just a moment, but first I want to start this morning by telling you this story—the 67-verse story—in my own words. I want to do this, one, because if I read it to you it would take 14 minutes, but two, because I want to tell you the story and see if it sounds like a story that's familiar to you.

Here's the story of Genesis 24. A father desires a bride for his son. The father's son is not one among many; he is the only son. In fact, he's not just a son, but he's a prince—the heir of a future kingdom that will bless all nations. But he has no bride. So the father enters into a covenant with his trusted servant and sends him on a mission. The servant must go and secure a bride for the son. The servant is not sent to the world at large but to the father's own people.

When the servant comes upon the bride-to-be, he tells her the good news of the father's plan and of the son whom she would one day marry. The servant gives her gifts from the father and speaks of the son's excellencies. He tells her about the promises of God that rest upon the son. And though she has never seen the son, she believes what she hears. Anticipation grows within her. She begins to long for the son whom she has never seen.

But her family urges her to stay, to wait, to delay going to the son, to linger a little while longer in their company. But when the question is placed before her, "Will you go with this man?" she does not hesitate. "I will go." She leaves what is familiar and she entrusts herself to the word that she has heard. She follows the servant on a long and weary journey to the promised land. And at last she lifts her eyes and there he is: the bridegroom. Her bridegroom. She is united to him. She becomes one with the son and the father is glorified.

Does that story sound familiar? Yeah. You see, this is what we have throughout all the scriptures: gospel glimpses. Gospel glimpses. A glimpse is a brief or partial look at something. I was telling my kids just this past week that throughout all 39 books of the Old Testament—you know, 75% of the scriptures—we don't even know the promised Son's name. But when Jesus of Nazareth's life, death, and resurrection is revealed, all of these

Old Testament glimpses, like Genesis 24 that we're looking at this morning, become crystal clear, don't they? Oh, that's what He was doing.

As I said earlier, over the next three weeks we're going to look at the story of a father securing a bride for his son and here's how we're going to do it. Here's how we're going to break this chapter up. This week we're going to cover verse 1 through 9, which unveil Abraham's plan. Then next week Carlton's going to show us how the faithful servant accomplishes the father's plan, and then I will finish this chapter with the bride choosing to leave her home and be united with the bridegroom. So that's what's down the road.

But without further ado, let's look at this first section of the story in a sermon I'm calling "A Promise-Shaped Plan." Let's read these nine verses together. First nine verses of Genesis 24.

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but you will go to my country and to my kindred and take a wife for my son Isaac."

The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Will you pray with me? Father, Your word is wonderful. And when we meditate on Your word and we see Your word for the truth that You desire to convey to us as Your people, we are blessed. And we pray that's exactly what would happen this morning. We pray that Your word would unfold before us like a flower and we would behold Your magnificence, Your glory, the excellencies of Christ, and that we would be transformed and changed into Your likeness. Convict us, Lord, where our hearts need conviction by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Encourage us where we need encouragement and bond us together as one as we wait on You to return. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

So the text tells us that Abraham is getting old. Some of you know what this is like. God has tremendously blessed him and one of the last things we're going to see him do is to secure a bride for his son. So he develops a plan, an important plan, to get this task—this very

important task—accomplished. And that's why I'm calling this plan Abraham makes a promise-shaped plan.

And I want to fill that out more for you so you know where I'm getting "promise-shaped plan" from. So three reasons, really briefly, why I'm giving it kind of this form, this sermon this shape. Number one: the purpose of the plan that Abraham is making is to see the promise that God has made to Abraham to be fulfilled or continue on. That's the purpose of his plan. It's what's motivating it.

Since Genesis 12 God has been unfolding a covenant with Abraham and God has promised him many things. So Abraham is developing a plan in order that those promises will come to pass. He's not primarily thinking, "My son is lonely. His mother is no longer with us. He needs a wife, someone to comfort him." Those things might have crossed his mind, but the primary purpose here is God's promises coming to fruition. That's the purpose of this promise-shaped plan.

Number two: the second reason I'm calling it a promise-shaped plan is because it is designed according to what God has revealed. As I said, this unfolding covenant that God has made with Abraham—He's continued to give him specifics about how His promise will come to pass. Specifics like which land he is to possess. He explains that this heir will not be the household servant, but it will come from his own body. God says not Ishmael, but Isaac. So he's continued to give him these guidelines, these things that will be how this promise will come to pass and Abraham's plan is in accordance with God's revelation. That's a really important piece. That's what gives it its shape.

So its purpose is to secure the promise and the details accord with what God has revealed, giving it its shape. And the last reason I'm calling it a promise-shaped plan—and this is my thesis this morning with this sermon—is that all plans that we make are either promise-shaped, meaning they are in accordance with the scriptures, motivated by a desire to see God glorified, and carried out by God's Spirit; or they are self-shaped, meaning they are fabricated in accordance with our own logic, motivated by a desire to get what we want, and carried out by the flesh.

Let me repeat that because that's so important. That's the sermon in a nutshell this morning. All plans that we make are either promise-shaped or self-shaped. Promise-shaped plans accord with the scriptures, are motivated by a desire to see God glorified, and are carried out by God's Spirit. Self-shaped plans accord with our own logic, motivated by a desire to get what we want, and carried out by the flesh.

So that's what we're going to see this morning as we observe the details of Abraham's plan to secure his son a bride. And just as I've already tried to show you, I think we'll gather a lot of insight on God the Father's plan securing His Son an eternal bride in order that our own plans—all of our plans that we make in this life—would be in light of that greater reality.

So let's begin with the first two verses. It says, "Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh...'" That's a good way to end verse two, right? What is going on there?

Abraham has buried his wife and his son is now around 40. And that seems a little old for marriage, a little late in life, so it makes us wonder: why is Isaac not married yet? Perhaps he's enjoying the single life, maybe he was a mama's boy, or maybe he's just not interested in marriage. Some commentators spiritualize Isaac's singleness, saying that he was waiting for the perfect timing. But we don't know that for a fact and the text doesn't really give us any hints. What we do know is that Abraham at this point is getting involved.

Abraham calls his most trusted servant, who some think is Eliezer, mentioned back in Genesis 15. Can't be sure of that but it seems to track. The text mentions that this servant was the oldest in his household and who had charge of all that he had. Abraham had great trust in this man.

And I don't want to say too much about this servant because next week Carlton's entire message is going to be on this faithful servant, but I do want to take a slight detour and say this: when you are faithful with little, you will usually be entrusted with more. When you're faithful with little, you'll usually be entrusted with more. That's what's happening in our text. If you were to ask Abraham, "What's more important to you, Abraham? All the possessions of your household that you have acquired, which are many, or your son's future bride?" There would be no hesitation for Abraham. And he's entrusting the securing of his son's bride to this servant. What an honor.

Maybe you're sitting here this morning and you want to be entrusted with more. Perhaps at your job, possibly here in our church, maybe at your school. I want to encourage you this morning that the desire to be entrusted with more is not inherently wrong. Ambition in and of itself is not bad. Men, the scriptures actually say that if you aspire to be an elder, you aspire a noble task. It's great. Women, Proverbs 31 presents a picture of a woman whose management seems to know no bounds because of her trustworthiness.

So I want to encourage us all to desire to be entrusted with more, that God might be glorified with our stewardship—our management—of all that He entrusts us with. But perhaps you're wanting to be entrusted with more and you've gotten a little frustrated with waiting, possibly wondering if you've been overlooked. Let me encourage you this morning: God sees you. He knows you, and your God—your Father—loves you. He will not allow your life to go to waste or fail to bring it to its full potential. That's what He means by this work that He began in you He will bring to completion. Your God is very capable.

But while you wait for more responsibility, here's what I would encourage you with: tighten up everything you have been entrusted with. Work on identifying weak spots and strengthen them. Ask others where you can grow. And lastly—and this is a big one—share

your aspirations with others. Share them. Too often we're shy about putting ourselves out there for fear of not making the team or not being good enough. But the only way we can help each other is if we know each other. Be vulnerable about what you desire.

All right, let's get back on the main road now and keep traveling. Abraham calls this most trusted servant and tells him to put his hand under his thigh. Now this was a common practice in the ancient Near East. Placing a hand under someone's thigh meant subjection to that person. But many commentators like John Calvin have also speculated that this act was symbolically tied to Abraham's loins or his seed—how he would have produced offspring—meaning this oath would have carried the weight of God's promise to Abraham's descendants.

Let me put it plainly: with Abraham calling his servant to place his hand under his thigh, the servant would have understood the immense seriousness of what he was about to be asked to do. This isn't running errands or doing Abraham a favor; this is a holy mission that Abraham is about to commission his servant with. Abraham is about to lay out for his servant his promise-shaped plan that he desires the servant to accomplish for him.

Now look at verses three and four with me. "Put your hand under my thigh that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but you will go to my country and to my kindred and take a wife for my son Isaac."

So the first thing I notice about Abraham's promise-shaped plan—and this is in your bulletin—it's clear on boundaries. It's clear on boundaries. Now the reason I say clear on boundaries rather than guidelines is because a boundary is something you cannot cross while a guideline is more of a general direction, right? And this is peculiar with Abraham's plan because usually when someone develops a plan they don't emphasize nor lead with what not to do.

But that's precisely what we see in our text. Abraham wants to be emphatically clear on what not to do. This is the boundary. Don't do this. Look at our text again. He says, "Swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites." Very serious concern Abraham has and rightfully so.

Back in Genesis 15 God told Abraham that He would allow the iniquity of the Amorites—that's some of the people who live among him in Canaan—He would allow their iniquity to grow and mature for the next hundreds of years. Hundreds of years. He says, "I'm going to let these people grow in their wickedness for hundreds of years like a mighty tree that will become firm in its obstinance against God, tall and proud." God says, "And when this tree reaches full maturity I'm going to bring it down."

Does that spook you that God acts in that manner? Literally allowing wickedness to grow up like a mighty tree so that He can lay it low and prove to the nations that He is God and no one stands against Him. That's what God has told Abraham He is doing with these people that are in his midst.

So why does Abraham not want his son's wife to come from the land of Canaan? Because God has made those people's future clear. They may look incredible. They may offer riches, pleasure, but their end has already been set and it will be devastating.

Parents in the room: do you know why you should do everything in your power to see that your children marry believers? Because God has made known the future of those who do not live for Him. Why would you want your children intermingled with those who stand under the judgment of God? Why would you want that?

The Apostle Paul is extremely clear about this in 2 Corinthians 6:14 and following. Listen to this: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them and I will be their God and they shall be my people.' Therefore go out from their midst and separate from them, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you and I will be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

Teenagers, single young adults, let me speak to you for a moment. The best way to wreck your life is to marry someone who still lives for themselves and not for Jesus. As I wrote this my eyes were filled with tears because I can point you to many people in this congregation who can give testimony to what I'm saying because they've lived through it. They've got scars, wounds, regrets. Her beauty or his charm is not worth the pain that will be brought into your life when you marry someone who is not a believer.

Now can God redeem these unequally yoked unions? Maybe you're sitting here this morning and you're married to an unbeliever. Oh, our God can redeem unbelievers who are married to believers. Amen? Yeah. And He has for many in this room, including myself. Casey was an unbeliever when we got married and God's story of redemption in her life, our marriage is incredible.

But I've been shocked in the past when we've shared our story with younger people only to hear about them boldly dating unbelievers thinking that God will do the same for them too. Young person, God forbid that you presume upon His grace. Do not do that. Listen to your parents' instructions. Honor their thoughts about the person who catches your eye. Your parents have been given to you by God for these kinds of decisions.

So Abraham has marked out a clear boundary for his servant. His son is not to take a wife from the pagans of Canaan but to go back to Abraham's homeland, back to Abraham's family, and find a wife there. Now some of you might be thinking that it seems a little odd for God to call Abraham to leave Mesopotamia where he was—his homeland—and then just to have his servant sent back to get him a wife from that place. But here's what you need to remember: Abraham's family where he came from is the line of Shem. Shem was the godly son of Noah. Therefore the people of Shem still retain the memory of the one true God. More than likely they are God-fearing people. This is why Abraham desires his son's bride come from them and not Canaan.

So Abraham's promise-shaped plan is clear on boundaries. The servant is not to take a wife from the pagans of Canaan but to go back to Mesopotamia and find a God-fearing bride among Abraham's kindred. Number two: Abraham's promise-shaped plan is calculated about methods. Look at verse five and six with me. Calculated about methods.

The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there." Again, crystal clear on boundaries. But in these verses we also pick up on—pick up on something else that's significant. Abraham's servant asked about taking Isaac back to the land because this was the custom of the day.

In the ancient Near East if a man desired a bride then he would be the one to go to her and he would be the one to relocate. Not her. If you wanted to secure a bride for that day and time the normal way to do it was to send Isaac to Rebekah and her family. And while Abraham knows this custom, he is going directly against conventional methods. Did you hear that? Abraham's not ignorant of the custom. He knows the custom and he's saying, "We're going directly against the custom."

I can just imagine Abraham's friend saying, "Brother, brother, Isaac is 40. He needs a wife. Let him go back to your homeland; otherwise you are taking a huge risk of him never finding a wife." But Abraham is calculated about his methods.

So why does he act contrary to the bride-securing methods of his day? Well, simply put, Abraham is organizing his life according to promise, not precedent. Organizing his life according to promise, not precedent. Abraham is prioritizing his convictions over the day's customs. Prioritizing his convictions over the day's custom. He is allowing his certainty of the future—hear me—his certainty of what God said is going to come to pass to fuel his courage in going upstream in the present.

Is that making sense? I mean, the way that God has called us to live in the here and now is swimming upstream. It's not according with what is wise in this world. So where do we get the courage to do that? Where do we get the courage to walk away from jobs? Where do we get the courage to deny ungodliness when that's the popular thing of the day? We get the

courage in looking forward to what God said is coming to pass. And when we believe that that will come to pass, it fuels us to walk in a way He's called us to now.

And you know what all of this does? It keeps him from putting the outcome of this scenario on his shoulders. You know, that's a lot of our problem. We know what God has said and we know what God desires and so what we do is we go, "Well, we got to get it done. We got to get it done." No, Abraham doesn't have to carry the weight of things turning out.

He believes God's going to turn them out but he doesn't always understand how. And he's become comfortable in that tension. He's not passively saying, "God wants it done, therefore He will do it and I need not do anything." That's not what he's saying. But he's also not saying, "God wants this done so it's up to me to get it done."

There's two ditches there that we get in, right? Aaron calls these truths in tension. And God has said to Abraham, "Through your offspring I will bless the nations." And remember what his—his thing was back—back then when God first said that to him? Remember what his thing was back then? "I don't have any kids. How's that going to happen? Let me figure it out myself." That didn't work out well.

Abraham has come to understand he has a responsibility to live according to this promise but he's also come to understand that it's okay to not understand how it's going to happen. This is why faith is so important. Trust in God produces right action. We must live in tension.

I want to keep pressing here because if I'm honest I don't like living in tension. I don't like someone telling me, "Hey, we're going on a trip and it's going to be a great time and you're going to love it," and then not telling me when we're going and what we're doing. Anybody else that way? Right?

When I'm coaching basketball the number one thing I coach is defense because defense wins championships, right, coach? But the hardest thing for me to get guys to do on defense is to see their man and the ball. To see their man and the ball. Now the hardest—the reason this is the hardest thing is because they always want to look at this one or this one. And because we're not a lizard we can't turn our eyes and look at both, right? And so here's what I have to teach guys: look here. Can you see both? "Well, yeah, but I can't see either one very good." That's good. Stay right there. Because when you do that, what happens is you end up in the right spot a lot of the time. Just see both. Just see both.

Now here's the spiritual turnover that this has for us. In the Christian life we don't want to get so fixated on God's promises that we can't see what He's commanded us to do. And we don't want to get so fixated on what He's commanded us to do that we forget His promises. You see how we get in these ditches? So what's the answer? Oh, the scriptures give it to us: fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. And when you fix your eyes on Jesus you will end up making the right decisions a lot of times. Now they won't feel good

because you'll be like, "I mean, this isn't the conventional method. This has got to be up to God." But you'll have confidence in that unconventional method because your eyes are fixed upon the one who speaks things into existence.

Abraham wasn't ignorant to the customs of his day; he just had more in his sight and so should we. Number three: Abraham's promise-shaped plan is confident in God. After Abraham's servant questioned the possibility of Abraham's plan failing, Abraham shows his hand.

So—so—so the servant's a little leery of this plan and he tells him that. And so what Abraham does is Abraham lays his hand down. Now for those of you that don't know that expression "shows his hand," let me explain. When you're playing cards you can see the cards you're holding, right. But no one else can see the cards you're holding. Therefore you bet on what you believe you're holding.

Now when you're so confident in what you're holding that you push all in, everyone goes [gasp] "I want to see what he's got." It garners the attention of other people when you act that way because you're so confident in what you're holding. And everyone gathers around anticipating you laying those cards down and seeing: are you a big bluff or are you actually holding great cards? And this is what Abraham does in verses seven and eight. Look at it with me.

"The Lord," that's Yahweh, "the God of heaven who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' servant, He will send His angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there."

Abraham is speaking and acting like a man who knows and trust his God. In essence he's witnessing to his servant. He's giving testimony to the Lord's faithfulness. He's saying, "Brother, you got to understand something. Many years ago the Lord called me out of Ur from away from my family, away from my kindred, by myself. He has been faithful to me every step of the way. There was one time I had to go seek shelter in Egypt. I thought my life was going to be taken from me. But I left Egypt having plundered them with more treasures than I could carry. Even though I've made more mistakes than I can count I've garnered the respect of everyone in this region. The Lord has given me victory in battle. He's given me a son from my wife's dead womb. He's shown me again and again that He can be trusted and He will provide a son for—or a wife for my son because He will fulfill His promises to me. I have great confidence. Great confidence."

Bam. That's why I'm going all in. My God never loses. I may lose. I may take an L. But I know that even my losses come from His good hand. They're good losses.

Now let's look at this a little closer because Abraham says something in verse seven that I think is important. He tells his servant that the Lord will send His angel before him. What does that mean? Well, we know that Abraham has had interaction with Yahweh's angel figures in the past and we know that Abraham understands how God utilizes them to accomplish His mission. So Abraham assures his servant, "Brother, you're not going on this mission alone. That's not the way God gets things done. He commissions us but He always goes with us."

And as I'm reading that text immediately what comes to my mind is the Great Commission. Where Jesus is about to ascend back to the Father and He gathers those who love Him, who—who have walked with Him, who want to believe in Him and trust in Him and have committed their lives to Him, and He looks at them and He says, "Go into all the earth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I've commanded and I will be with you—Wait, I thought You're going up?—No, I will be with you until the end of the age."

As Abraham commissioned his faithful servant to go and secure a bride for his son, so God has called us to be faithful servants proclaiming the good news to the ends of the earth. More on this next week from Carlton. But as I close today I want us to read verse nine and end there.

So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter. Swore to him concerning this matter. Abraham has developed his promise-shaped plan to his servant—a plan that is clear on boundaries, calculated about methods, and confident in God. And now the time comes for his servant to covenant with him, making Abraham's plan the servant's mission. This is the handoff.

And do you see how this story points us so well to the greater story? Church, God has been so clear with us about His boundaries, has He not? So clear about His boundaries. And let me just take a side and say this. I'm reading a book on the reformed nature of spiritual formation right now and—and one of the things that it talks about is the reformers were staunch on not creating more boundaries than are in the Bible. God's given us the right boundaries.

So word to us all: don't build on those boundaries. More boundaries. We love to do that, don't we? "Oh, I know You drew the line here, Lord, but—but—but I think it's better if we go here with it." God forbid you do that. He's been clear on boundaries. He instructs us through His Holy Spirit, doesn't He? Carlton and I have been talking some and—and we—we think we need to talk more about the Holy Spirit around here. Look out. [laughter]

But He instructs us through His Holy Spirit that we might be calculated about the methods we use, about how we live our lives. And He has given us His very own Son that we might have supreme confidence. That we might sub-sing about this confidence week in and week out, that He loves us. And if He's willing to die for us, what is He not willing to give us? If

He's willing to give us His own life, what else—what—what would He withhold? This gives us confidence.

If you're here this morning and you've never covenanted with God then I want to invite you to do that. John 3:16 says for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. If God has revealed Himself to you this morning then He is calling you to covenant with Him by repenting of your sins and trusting in His Son. Please come find me or someone else after the service. Let's pray.