

ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Genesis 24

All the classes should be very familiar with the names *Ishmael* and *Isaac* as the two sons of Abraham, should know who their mothers were, and why Isaac instead of Ishmael was Abraham's heir.

Doctrinal Points

The higher and the lower rational faculties.

The doctrine of marriage.

The necessity of the union of goodness and truth to produce anything living.

Notes for Parents

For Sarah and Abraham the Lord performed a miracle, for Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah over ninety when Isaac was born. The name *Isaac* means "laughter" and we read that Sarah said "God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me." Ishmael was fourteen when Isaac was born, and because he mocked at the baby, he and his mother were sent away to live in the wilderness, where Ishmael became the father of a numerous people, mentioned several times in the Bible as the Ishmaelites. Sarah and Abraham both lived to see Isaac grow up, for Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven, and Abraham was a hundred and seventy-five when he died.

It was after Sarah's death that Abraham sent his servant on the long journey to Haran to get a wife for Isaac from among the descendants of his own brother Nahor. The story of Rebekah at the well is a well-known one. It may seem to us today a strange way of choosing a wife, but it had in it all the elements which really make for a happy marriage. The principal one was trust in

the Lord. Abraham was obeying the Lord in not allowing his son to marry a woman of different religious standards from his own. The servant asked the Lord's guidance in the discovery of the right maiden. Rebekah's family and Rebekah herself accepted what they believed to be the Lord's will, and Isaac received the wife so chosen without question. There would be fewer broken homes today if parents brought up their children to think of marriage as a holy state to be prepared for and entered into under the Lord's guidance and with the desire and intention to serve Him. Parents today do not choose mates for their children, but they can do much to prepare them to make wise choices for themselves.

Primary

This is a long chapter and is difficult to cut to a suitable reading for younger children. Interrupt the reading at each break in the continuity and tell briefly the part of the story which has been omitted. Parents reading with the family at home are urged to read the whole chapter aloud, but not all at once.

Abraham loved his son Ishmael, but the Lord told him that he was to have another son who would be the child of his true wife Sarah. So when Ishmael was fourteen years old, Sarah had a son. He was named Isaac, which means "laughter."

After Isaac grew up and his mother Sarah had died, Abraham sent his servant to Haran, where Abraham's brother Nahor had settled, to get a wife for Isaac from among his own relatives. The servant took ten camels with him on the journey, as well as presents to give to his master's future wife and her family.

Where did the servant stop near the city of Haran?

What did he ask of the Lord?

What maiden did the Lord show him was to be Isaac's wife?

Who was Rebekah?

Her parents and her brother Laban welcomed Abraham's servant.

They felt that the Lord had chosen Rebekah for Isaac and so they were willing to let her go.

Rebekah was willing also.

Where was Isaac when he first saw Rebekah?

Was he satisfied with the wife the servant had brought him?

Junior

In connection with this lesson fix in the children's minds the origin of the "city of Nahor" or Haran. Show it to them on a map and trace Abraham's original journey, pointing out Ur, Haran, Shechem, and Bethel where he first built altars, and Hebron where he settled. Have them look up the Bible references in their notes. A chart of the family of Abraham will be included with the lesson on Jacob's wives and sons.

The Lord had wrought a miracle for Sarah and had given her a son when she was over ninety years old. This son was Isaac, whose name means "laughter." He was so named because of Sarah's great joy when he was born. Read Genesis 21:6. Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven. Then she died, and Abraham bought as a burying place for her the cave of Machpelah, which became the family burying place and is mentioned several times later in the Bible.

Isaac now needed a wife. Most of the other people in the land at that time were Canaanites and worshiped idols. Abraham wanted his son to have a wife who worshiped Jehovah as he did because he knew that religion was the most important thing in a person's life and that a difference of religion would be likely to lead to differences of opinion and unhappiness and also might cause Isaac to forsake the Lord. So he sent his servant back to his own relatives to find a wife for Isaac.

What did Abraham's servant take with him?

Where was he to go?

Who was Nahor?

The "city of Nahor" was named Haran after another brother of Abraham. Read Genesis 11:27-32. When Abraham came from Ur of Chaldea to the Holy Land, his father and his brother Nahor and his family, as well as Lot, Haran's son, had started with him, but Nahor had stopped and settled at Haran before they reached the Holy Land.

Where did Abraham's servant stop when he came near Haran?

How did he try to make sure he would pick out the right maiden?

Did the Lord answer his prayer?

Who came out to draw water?

In those days people did not have running water in their houses. Water was very scarce, and often there was just one well for a whole city. Every family had to send someone to the well to draw water and carry it home, and water for the animals had to be drawn up from the well, too, and poured into troughs so that they could drink. The animals were led out to drink from the troughs. Read Genesis 29:2-3.

What did Rebekah do?

How did the servant know she was the right maiden?

Who was Rebekah's grandfather? Who was her brother?

We want to remember the name *Laban* because we shall learn more about him in the future.

How was Abraham's servant received by his master's relatives?

Why were they willing to let Rebekah go with him?

You see they, too, believed in the Lord and wanted to be led by Him.

What presents did the servant give Rebekah?

Was Rebekah willing to go with him?

Who went with her from her home?

If you would like to know the name of Rebekah's nurse, read Genesis 16:13-14. *Beer* is the Hebrew word for well. Remember this when you see other names in the Bible which begin with these four letters.

What did Isaac and Rebekah take for their home?



Intermediate

This is a difficult lesson for the Intermediates, but it is good to introduce them to the idea not only of what true marriage is but of the necessity of the union of goodness and truth in order to produce anything living and permanent. The teacher should study the lesson carefully and try to be prepared with illustrative examples which will come within the experience of his particular class.

Sons represent truths and daughters affections. But in a marriage the husband represents a certain good and the wife represents the affection for the kind of truth which goes with that good. You will understand this better when you are older, but perhaps an example will help now. Suppose you make up your mind to grow up to be good. You will first have to learn how—that means to learn truths. But suppose you care only to learn the kind of truths which will make you appear good to other people and do not care to learn from the Lord what is good in His sight. Then your goodness will be only external or natural goodness. It will not be true spiritual goodness at all. Abraham, you remember, obeyed the Lord. His true wife Sarah pictures affection for truth from the Lord, while the Egyptian servant Hagar pictures affection for external or natural truth. We all begin to do right from this natural affection. That is, we like to be praised and to avoid punishment. So our first reasoning is based on the thought of what will profit us most. This is Ishmael. But when we are older, we begin to see that this is not enough; we see that we ought to please the Lord, whatever people may think of us. Then our reasoning begins to be based on truth from the Lord. This is Isaac, the son who was finally born to Sarah. And after he was born, Hagar and Ishmael were sent away and Isaac was the one who grew up at home and later took his father's place as head of the family.

Let us think back to the beginning of Abraham's story and see if we remember it—where he came from, why he left his birthplace, who left with him, where they first stopped, and who stayed there. Now again we hear of Haran, the city of Nahor. When it was time for Isaac to marry, Abraham did not want him to take a wife from among the Canaanites. The Canaanites were idolaters. Abraham wanted his son to have a wife who would worship Jehovah as he did. He felt sure that among his brother Nahor's family a good wife for Isaac could be found. You see that the new kind of affection which belonged with the spiritual reasoning which Isaac represents had to spring from the same childlike obedience to the Lord in which Abraham had always been.

Abraham sent his servant to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. This was not a servant in the sense in which we use the word. He was rather a steward, the man who had charge of all Abraham's household and possessions. Abraham's wealth is shown by the fact that the servant traveled with ten camels and took very valuable presents for the bride and her family. All our external abilities and knowledges are useful when they are made to serve our spiritual development. Abraham's servant represents the kind of understanding of external things which performs this use, and camels represent external knowledges. We have to "use our heads" in doing good as in everything else. Perhaps you remember that John the Baptist, who came to call people to repentance, wore raiment of camel's hair.

Abraham's servant did not, however, depend entirely on his own judgment. When he stopped at the well outside of Haran, he asked a sign of the Lord. Rebekah came to the well in fulfillment of the sign. She was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. Remember that her brother was named Laban, for we shall hear more of him later. Rebekah and her family had the same feeling toward the Lord that Abraham had. They were sure that it was the Lord who had chosen Rebekah for Isaac, and so were willing that she should go.

This is a beautiful story of the making of a happy marriage. When people are to live together all their lives, it is very important that they should be suited to each other, not merely in external ways, but also in the things of the heart and mind; for if they are not, they will be unhappy and cannot make the right kind of home. We should pray the Lord to help us choose wisely in this most important choice of our whole lives. We should also try to find someone who has the same standards of right and wrong that we have. This means that it is very important that husband and wife have the same religious belief.

You remember that water corresponds to truth. In the story, the well from which the water was drawn represents the letter of the Word. Rebekah's willingness to draw water from the well not only

for Abraham's servant but for his camels also pictures willingness to go to the Word for truth to guide our external conduct as well as our religious thought. It was because Abraham and Isaac trusted the Lord that they sent the servant to Haran for Isaac's wife; it was because Rebekah's parents and her brother trusted the Lord that they were willing to let her go; and it was because Rebekah trusted the Lord that she was willing to leave her home and take the long journey to a strange land to marry a man she had never seen. Read the last verse of the chapter. It is a beautiful picture of the beginning of a new home upon the foundation of the memory of a happy childhood home.

Basic Correspondences

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| sons | = | truths |
| daughters | = | goods |
| a husband | = | good |
| a wife | = | affection for truth |
| a servant | = | useful understanding of external things |
| camels | = | general external knowledges |
| a well | = | the letter of the Word |

Senior

Stress the fact that as we grow up our states change and that each new state needs new truth from the Lord to direct it. We never become wise in and from ourselves. The nature of marriage as a representative of the union of divine love and wisdom in the Lord should be mentioned, and the need of looking to the Lord for guidance in choosing a mate as well as the need for being sure that the desire of both is to serve the Lord in and through their marriage.

Isaac—Sarah's son, who was to inherit all of Abraham's possessions and become the head of the family when his father died—represents a kind of reasoning power based on belief in the truth revealed by the Lord in the Word instead of on worldly ideas of what is true. Sarah and Abraham were both very old when Isaac was born. This pictures the fact that by the time our "spiritual

rational” begins to develop, our childhood states of simple trust and obedience are passing away. Our lesson for today—Isaac’s marriage—takes place after Sarah’s death.

When Abraham was first called by the Lord to leave Ur of Chaldea and go to the land of Canaan, he did not start alone. In addition to Sarah, his brother Nahor and his family went with him, as well as their father Terah and Lot, the son of another brother, Haran, who had died. Lot, you remember, went all the way to Canaan with Abraham, but Nahor and his family went only part way. They settled in Mesopotamia—which means “between the rivers” (the Tigris and the Euphrates)—and the place where they settled was named Haran for Lot’s father. It is also called in the Bible the “city of Nahor.” There Terah died.

After Sarah’s death Abraham determined to find a wife for his son Isaac in the family of his brother Nahor. In our chapter for today he sends his servant—really his steward—on the long journey to Haran. Abraham’s home, you remember, was in Hebron, in the southern part of the Holy Land. The ancient Jews were always forbidden to take wives from the people of any land in which they were. But we know that this command has a deeper meaning. A true marriage represents the union of good and truth—the man, before marriage, representing the understanding, and the woman, the affections. When a good understanding is united to evil desires, great wrongs result. We sometimes read in the newspapers of a “mastermind” in a gang of criminals. Isaac, the spiritual rational, must be united to the affection for doing right in the Lord’s sight—not to any merely worldly ambition. A person can be truly rational only when he has both true thoughts and good desires. The family of Nahor represents a state of simple goodness, such as many Gentiles have.

Wells play an important part in the story of Isaac. Water, as we know, represents truth. The well from which this water of truth is drawn is the letter of the Word. We remember the story of the Lord at the well in Samaria and the living water He promised. Rebekah’s willingness to draw water for the man and his camels

pictures the fact that a true spiritual affection wishes to be guided by the Word in all the affairs of life, even worldly affairs, for the camels represent enjoyment of knowing about the natural world. Abraham, Isaac, Abraham's servant, Rebekah, and all her family were governed by trust in the Lord and willingness to obey Him.

This is a beautiful story of how a happy marriage should be formed—not that parents should choose their children's mates, but that the Lord's guidance should be sought and followed. In the first place, people should have the same religious beliefs in order to live happily together, for these are the deepest things in their lives and determine their standards of right and wrong. And both partners in the marriage should wish above all things to do the Lord's will. Then they will agree in their aims for their own lives and for their children, and their home will be founded on unselfish love of the Lord and the neighbor, which is the source of all happiness in this world as well as in the spiritual world.



Adult

Discuss the different types of affection for truth and the need of the proper affection if the life is to bear spiritual fruit. The mere "search for truth" is not necessarily good. Another fruitful topic for discussion is the duty to bring up our children from the beginning with a spiritual idea of marriage. This is the most important thing parents can do in directing their children's choice. Note that in the story it was not the servant or the parents who chose Isaac's mate, but the Lord, and everyone concerned recognized the Lord's part in the matter.

The story of the birth of Isaac pictures the beginning of the development of the higher rational faculty in us, the faculty which looks deeper for its basis than mere external appearances of truth, and depends instead upon the truth revealed by the Lord in His Word. When Isaac was born, Abraham was a hundred years old, Sarah over ninety, and Ishmael fourteen. We recall that Ishmael, because he mocked at the baby Isaac, was sent away with his mother into the wilderness, where he married an Egyptian wife and became the father of a numerous people. Then follows the

story of Abraham's temptation to offer Isaac as a burnt sacrifice to the Lord, and of how at the last moment the Lord checked the sacrifice and provided a ram in place of Isaac. We will doubtless remember that here again we have a case of the language of appearance. The Lord of course did not command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but He does command each of us to be willing to do His will at whatever apparent sacrifices of our own desires or possessions. Chapter 23 tells of the death of Sarah at the age of a hundred and twenty-seven, and of her burial in a cave in a field in Machpelah, which Abraham bought for the purpose from Ephron the Hittite. This, too, has its inner meaning, but the literal fact is also important to remember because the cave of Machpelah is mentioned several times later in the Bible story, and because it should be noted that Sarah died before Isaac's marriage.

As little children we live, as it were, on the celestial plane, being ruled by our affections and surrounded as to our souls by influences from the celestial heavens. This is the Abraham stage. But as we develop in body and mind, this state gradually passes and a new one succeeds. We come to be ruled by our rational faculty, to look to it as the head of our house, so to speak. This is the Isaac stage. It is an entirely new state, with new interests and new affections. When it is fully developed, it can no longer cling to the former childlike states of affection and thought. We say that a little child can be led by love, but an older child must be reasoned with. Both the little child and the older child when in their best states love the truth, but they love it in a different way. Each has a type of affection for truth which is appropriate to his state. So when Isaac is developed to maturity, Sarah dies and a wife must be found for him to take the place his mother has held in his life. The way in which this wife is sought and found pictures in every detail the way in which true rationality is established in the life of every one of us who develops as he should under the Lord's guidance.

Abraham in the story pictures the Lord at work in our hearts. His eldest servant, who was over all his household, stands for the natural mind, which governs our daily life—if it is a true servant—

in the interests of the Lord and according to His will. This servant is told to seek a wife for Isaac, but not to seek her among the degenerate inhabitants of Canaan. We recall the beginning of the story of Noah in Genesis 6, where it is said that the sons of God married the daughters of men, and a race of giants ensued who eventually destroyed each other. That pictured the uniting of truths from the Lord with selfish natural affections, using what we know of the Lord to excuse and support our selfish desires. Now we are again warned against falling into the same evil. Our new rational mind must not be “married” to selfish and worldly desires—we must not use our new faculty to excuse our faults and to support us in selfish living and thinking. Instead, it must have a wife from its own people, an affection for learning about the Lord and about how to serve Him.

This can be illustrated by the right and the wrong way to study the Bible. If, when we read the Bible, we are constantly looking for statements which we like because they make us feel that we are good—and perhaps that people who disagree with us are wrong—and that the Lord will forgive us whatever we do, and pass over all the condemnations and commands which point out our evils, we are “marrying” our rational understanding of the Word to our selfish affections—the “daughters of the Canaanites.” But when we read the Bible to find out where we are wrong in the Lord’s sight and to find help to correct our faults, then we are “seeking a wife for Isaac among Abraham’s kindred.” It is our natural mind, the same part of us which gathers knowledge of everyday affairs and keeps it in order, which goes out to find this true wife. It makes use of all that we have learned from childhood about the Lord and His will—the ten camels (AC 3048)—and it goes back to our first understanding of doctrine which is represented by Haran. There the servant found Rebekah by the well of water, and he recognized her as his master’s bride because she willingly drew water not only for him but also for his camels. The well, of course, is the letter of the Word, and the water is truth from the Word. Only a genuine affection for divine truth will draw from the Word

refreshment for the mind and for all the knowledges of the Lord which are laid up in it. Selfish affections would gladly let the knowledge of the Lord in the mind die. We may bring this lesson home to ourselves in this way: When we attend church and Sunday school, do we love to hear the Bible explained and try to apply its lessons to our own character and its problems? Or, when the minister begins to touch upon some wrong thought or feeling which we recognize as our own, do we close our ears and try not to listen, or try to think of someone else to whom the lesson applies?

But there is still another part of the story. When Rebekah was found, she had to be brought to Isaac. Isaac was on no account to go back to Haran. Haran was not in the Holy Land at all; it was merely one stage of the journey to the Holy Land, the time when one begins dimly to see that he must obey the Lord and try to get to heaven. After we have developed our rational faculty, the Lord does not want us to go back to this state. Some people interpret the Lord's statement that we must become as little children (Matthew 18:3) to mean that we should go back to the blind faith of a little child and merely obey the Lord's teaching without expecting to understand it. This is not what the Lord means. He gives us our brains to use in matters of religion above everything else. He wants us to study and understand His teaching, to become His "friends" (John 15:15). What we are to seek to retain—or to regain—from our childhood is not our ignorance but our humility, gentleness, and trust: our "innocence." We are, as Swedenborg says, to cultivate the "innocence of wisdom" in place of the "innocence of ignorance." So Rebekah must be brought to Isaac. Our affection for the Lord's truth must be raised to the rational plane of our lives and united to our rational faculty. Then Isaac is "comforted after his mother's death." When we have grown out of the state of simple, blind acceptance of divine truth, we are sometimes sad and bewildered. We can no longer accept some things which we have heretofore taken for granted, because our unaided reason cannot explain them, and yet we miss our belief in

them and seem lost without it. This story teaches us that nothing will really satisfy us until we can restore our belief by seeing its rational basis. A great many people who as little children have believed in the Lord and the Bible lose their faith when their reason develops because they have not found the rational explanation of the Word which the New Church has to give. Many of them long for their early states of belief and trust and never feel “at home” again. They move about from one church to another, looking for a doctrine which they can accept. The story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah has a challenge for the New Church.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 3212: “*And Isaac was comforted after his mother. That this signifies a new state, is evident from the signification of ‘receiving comfort,’ as being a new state; for a state of consolation is new; and that it succeeded to the foregoing is signified by ‘after his mother.’ . . . When man is being regenerated, he is then becoming altogether another, and is being made new; therefore also when he has been regenerated, he is called ‘born again,’ and ‘created anew.’ Then, although he has a similar face and a similar speech, yet his mind is not similar; his mind, when he is regenerate, is open toward heaven, and there dwells therein love to the Lord and charity toward his neighbor, together with faith. It is the mind that makes a man another, and a new man. This change of state cannot be perceived in the body of man, but in his spirit, the body being merely the covering of his spirit; and when it is put off, then his spirit appears, and this (provided he has been regenerated) in altogether another form, for it then has the form of love and charity in beauty inexpressible.*”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Who was the “father of the Jews”? *Abraham*
- J. Where did he come from? *Ur*
- J. Why did he go to the Holy Land? *God called him*
- J. Where did he settle there? *Hebron*
- P. Who was Abraham’s wife? *Sarah*
- P. Who was Hagar? *her maid*
- P. Who was Abraham’s first son? *Ishmael*
- J. Whose son was Isaac? *Sarah’s*

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- J. Why were Hagar and Ishmael sent away? *mocking attitude*
- J. Why did Abraham not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite? *idolaters*
- P. Whom did Abraham send to find a wife for Isaac? *servant*
- P. Where did he send him? *Haran*
- J. Who had settled there? *Abraham's brother*
- P. Where did Abraham's servant stop? *at a well*
- J. What sign did he ask of the Lord? *woman who offered to draw water*
- P. Who fulfilled the sign? *Rebekah*
- J. Who was Rebekah? *Nahor's granddaughter*
- P. Why did her parents let her go with Abraham's servant? *believed it was God's will*
- J. Where did Isaac meet her? *in field*
- P. Was Isaac satisfied with Rebekah? *yes*
- S. To what do Ishmael and Isaac correspond? *first and second rational*
- I. What is represented by the well? *the Word*