

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67  
Psalm 45:10-17

Romans 7:15-25a  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-09/no-secret-plan>

Philip Cary, in an article in the *Christian Century*, declares that he has discovered that many young Christians have anxieties about God's will. These young people believe that God's will is out there waiting to be found, like the one person they are convinced God has picked for them to marry. They believe that God has a rather detailed will for their lives and they are anxious about discerning God's will for them. How do you know where to look? And how do you know when you've found it? What happens if you mistake the will of God and don't marry "the one" that God has chosen for you? Or what happens if you only get God's "second best" will for your life. A whole boatload of anxieties is tied up with the notion of "finding God's will."

With a cursory reading of our Old Testament lesson this morning, one could think that it is simply a story of discerning God's will, discerning who is God's choice for a wife for Isaac. Abraham did not want Isaac to marry a local woman, that is a Canaanite. Abraham wanted a woman from his own people, from his own country. Abraham's servant is given no more instructions than that. He goes to Abraham's homeland. He comes up with a plan to discern God's will and throws it at God. God, if so and so happens, she's the one. When he sees Rebekah, she does exactly as the servant proposed and he is convinced this is the wife. The servant discusses it with Rebekah and her family. They all agree to the arrangement. Rebekah goes with the servant back to Isaac. Isaac and Rebekah become husband and wife and they live happily ever after. Well, we need to take a closer look at the story.

First of all, notice how the servant thinks Rebekah is the one. The servant came up with a plan and made a deal with God. "I'm going to stand here at this spring of water. If a young woman comes to get water, and I say to her, "Please give me a little water from the jar to drink, and she says, "Drink and I will get water for your camels also, that is the woman for Isaac."

Notice who is giving the instructions here! The servant tells God how the servant will know who is the correct woman! God never responds. God never assents to this agreement, nor does God say, "I don't work that way" Dare we tell God how God should reveal God's will to us? What if God chooses not to do it the way we want? I wish it would be so simple. I even tried that with God. I had applied to three seminaries during my senior year of college. Not knowing which seminary I should go to, I told God, "OK, whichever of the three seminaries accepts me, that is the one you have chosen for me. All three seminaries accepted! God, that was not the deal.

There seems to be some other influences besides God's will. Notice how impressed the servant is with Rebekah's credentials. She has the proper genealogy. That is, she comes from Abraham's family and Abraham's homeland. She has good looks. The servant enjoys looking at the lovely woman. One has to be careful about doing that today. As one married friend of mine once said, "Just because I ordered the meal, doesn't mean I cannot look at the menu." And she is a virgin. Now the Hebrew word here is not explicitly that of a virgin. Rather, it refers to a woman of marriageable age. But it does add the phrase, "whom no man had known," making it clear she was a virgin. It raises the question, "How did he know?"

There is one other influence. It has to do with wealth. People seemed to be impressed with the prosperity that is displayed in this story. When Rebekah watered those camels, the servant gave her the nose ring and laid upon her the gold bracelets. I am sure this gold incentive caught her attention! All this and more was to be hers, if she accepted this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This deal offering her a husband had, you might say, a signing bonus. The servant enjoys assessing the wealth of Rebekah's family. Laban, Rebekah's brother, sees the rings, bracelets, and camels that the servant brought with him. It is clear to Laban that this Abraham, Isaac's father, is very wealthy. His sister will be marrying into a wealthy family. Laban is no fool! As soon as Laban saw the nose-ring, and bracelets, then he invited the servant in, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and place for the camels?" There is some shrewd negotiating going on here. Upon a closer reading of the story, it raises the question, is this a love story or was it a shrewd business deal? There is a lot more going on here than finding whom God has chosen to be Isaac's soulmate.

And as I said earlier, God has done nothing visible. God has done nothing directly to indicate God's choice for a wife. God did not intervene or intrude here. There is no doubt that God's guidance is evident in this story. However, there can be no doubt that God was guiding, much like God guided the Israelites through their forty years wilderness, after they were freed from their Egyptian bondage and before they returned to the Promised Land of Israel. There is no doubt that this story is about the will of God.

Perhaps we should think of it as God's guidance. I am not so sure that God has that one soulmate or school or career. Phillip Cary suggests it is more about faithful following than it is about discerning God's directives for us individually. You will not find

in scripture some formula or method for making decisions. God does not give us a directive to tell us exactly what we are to do in every situation. There is no formula for discerning who is God's choice for a soulmate. Instead, scripture gives us guidance. In the Old Testament we read, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God [and] ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is the heart of God's commandment. It is said that Martin Luther, the Sixteenth century church reformer, recited the Ten Commandments every morning in his prayers. I don't think Christians today can do any better than to recite them every morning ourselves, to give us guidance in our day to day lives. God's providence governs the universe and all of history. God provides guidance, not directives.

God gives us guidance, and that gives us work to do in making our own decisions. David Bartlett, a New Testament professor, wrote, "There is no doubt that God is at work in all the complexities of human life, including love and marriage. There is considerable doubt that God is in charge of a cosmic Matchmaker.com, just waiting for us to fill out our profile and push the send button."

Thanks be to God  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.