

First Things – Genesis

Genesis 22:20-23

“Look Closely or You Might Miss It”

I. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE REALITY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

A. Where He is operating

B. What He is ordering

II. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE REVELATION OF GOD'S PLAN

A. God may reveal something partially

B. God may reveal something preemptively

III. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE RECORD OF GOD'S POWER

A. Sometimes God moves in undistinguished ways

B. Sometimes God moves in undisclosed ways

1. Genesis 22 is a grand Bible chapter. The drama of Abraham and Isaac's journey up the mountain, and the glory of God's intervention and provision there is one of the greatest of all Bible stories.

2. At the close of the chapter, there is a little section of genealogy that seems quite disconnected from the excitement of the epic that precedes it.

3. It is as one old writer described it, “a catalogue of strange and hard names...”¹ At first glimpse, it doesn't seem to be all that important.

4. As I have thought over this little text, I think it is something akin to the credits at the end of a movie. Few people are interested in them, and even fewer actually read them.

5. But the truth is that unlike the credits of a film, all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God, and is profitable.

6. An old Scottish preacher named Robert Candlish says of this text, “...it is introduced for a particular purpose, and that no unimportant one.”

7. I think if we look closely and carefully at these verses, we will not miss the importance of what is here.

8. With that being said, I believe the message of this text is just that; we don't always see all the things that God is doing in our lives at any given moment.

9. What seems to be a simple, uneventful situation in your life may later prove to be the hand of God at work, bringing you closer to His purposes.

10. Let's look closely at this text, and be reminded of the significance that can be found in a simple passage. First of all, we are reminded here that:

I. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE REALITY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE

1. Verse 20 of our text says, “*And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor.*”
2. Way back in chapter 12, we read of Abraham’s departure from his homeland. That had been some sixty years before.
3. As far as we know, there had been no contact with any of Abraham’s people back home. When he set out to follow God he had left his old life behind.
4. Now word has come to Abraham regarding his family back in Mesopotamia. With this news, Abraham was reminded that God was at work, even in ways he could not see.
5. Likewise, we do not always know what God is up to in any given place or at any given time. Nevertheless, we can be certain that He *is* up to something. He is providentially working, even when we cannot see it.
6. Consider with me the providence of God, and realize that we don’t always see:

A. Where God is operating

1. From Genesis chapter 12 forward, the Biblical story narrows its focus to the life of Abraham and his sojourning in the land of Canaan.
2. From the reader’s perspective, it might seem as if Abraham was the only man on earth with whom God was dealing and working.
3. Likewise, from Abraham’s perspective, apart from his meeting with Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God, he knew little of God’s work outside his own little world.
4. Now word came to him that God had blessed his brother’s house as well. The family he had left behind had not been forgotten by God.
5. If we are not careful, we will begin to think that God is only at work in our little corner of the world. We will forget the bigness of God and the global nature of what He is doing.
6. For instance, right now many are bemoaning the state of the American church. In our country numbers are declining and churches seem to be spiritually weakening.
7. There is a danger that we will see the spiritual decline in our land as a sign of the overall condition of the kingdom of Christ. The reality, however, is that God is presently at work in mighty ways in other parts of the world.

8. A good example of this is what God is doing in the country of China. In 1949, there were an estimated 700,000 Christians in China. Today, even the most conservative figures list the number of believers at somewhere around 80 million.ⁱⁱ

9. A missionary with the International Mission Board told of a group of Chinese famers who were trained and sent out to plant churches. They originally planted 11 churches. Within one year, those 11 churches had grown to 88 churches.

10. We may not be able to see it, but God is working and moving right now in this world.

11. As we talk about the unseen providence of God, we realize not only that we don't always see where God is operating, but furthermore, we don't always see:

B. What God is ordering

1. In our text news came to Abraham that his brother, Nahor, had also been blessed with a family. In fact, the text says that 8 children were born into his family.

2. One of them was named Bethuel, and the Spirit includes for us the detail in verse 23 that, "...Bethuel begat Rebekah..."

3. About the time that Isaac was born, Nahor's children were having children, one of whom was Rebekah, the girl who would one day be Isaac's wife.

4. All those years that Abraham was travelling through Canaan, waiting on the fulfillment of God's promise in the *birth* of Isaac, he had no idea that God was already planning ahead for the *bride* of Isaac.

5. God was ordering things before Abraham even knew they needed to be in order. God was preparing the way before His servant even knew a way would be needed.

6. If we believe in a God who sovereignly works all things together for our good and His glory, then we can be assured that He has already ordered and aligned the things needed for those plans to eventually come together.

7. That is what providence means! It means that God is over all and in control of even what seems to be disconnected and unrelated events.

8. He brings all the different colored threads together in His time to weave a perfect tapestry that proves He had a wise plan all along!

9. The poet, Esther Fields put it this way:

*Things don't just happen to us who love God,
They're planned by His own dear hand,
Then molded and shaped, and timed by His clock,
Things don't just happen – They're plannedⁱⁱⁱ*

10. Even when we are not aware of it, the providence of God is a reality! He is at work at all times and in all things for His glory.

11. Looking closely at this text, not only are we reminded that *we don't always see the reality of God's providence*, but furthermore, we are reminded that:

II. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE REVELATION OF GOD'S PLAN

1. If we put ourselves in Abraham's shoes, I'm not sure we would have immediately grasped the significance of this news from home.

2. I imagine when the word reached Abraham about his brother's family; he may have said to himself, "Well, thank God for that! I'm happy for Nahor and Milcah!"

3. I don't know that Abraham would have initially seen how important this news was going to be for him, and Isaac, and the future of his family.

4. In much the same way, there are times when God reveals things to us, that *at the time*, we don't see fully how important it is going to be.

5. We don't always see the revelation of God's plan, even as it unfolds before us. Consider this with me. First of all, sometimes:

A. God may reveal something partially

1. Look carefully at this text with me. Verse 20 says, "*it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor.*"

2. In your Bible there is a probably a colon or a semicolon after Nahor, indicating that the quote continues in the next verse.

3. The reality, however, is that the punctuation has been supplied by the English translators. We really don't know where the quotation originally stopped.

4. It could be that all Abraham was told was that children had been born in Nahor's house. Perhaps their names were given too, but it is unlikely that he was told about Rebekah.

5. In chapter 24, when Abraham sends a servant to find a bride for Isaac from Nahor's house, he says nothing specifically about Rebekah.

5. My point is that God probably did not reveal to Abraham the full plan for Isaac and Rebekah's marriage. He gave Abraham a partial revelation, but not all the details.

6. It has been said that God gives information on a need-to-know basis. Many times that is the case. In Abraham's own life, when God originally called him from Ur, he did not tell him exactly where he was going, just that he needed to go.

7. Right now, you may not know all that God is planning for your future. Your future may seem like a big question mark, but that does not mean that God does not have a period out there somewhere.

8. Sometimes He is pleased to only partially reveal His plan. If that is all He will give us, then let us be thankful for it, and trust that more light will come when we need it.

9. In talking about God's revelation of His plan in our lives, we are mindful that at times God may reveal something partially. In this text, we are also reminded that at times:

B. God may reveal something preemptively

1. In the flow of Abraham's Biblical story, it almost seems as if this section should come before chapter 24, rather than at the close of chapter 22.

2. Chapter 24 tells the story how Abraham's servant traveled to Mesopotamia and found Rebekah, bringing her back to be married to Isaac.

3. Yet, it is here, at this point in Abraham's life, probably several years before Isaac and Rebekah would ever meet, that God revealed this information to His servant.

4. In other words, God shared this with Abraham preemptively; that is before He really needed it.

5. Sometimes, God sees fit to reveal things to us that we don't see the significance of for many years to come. However, God is always planting something in our hearts.

6. One old writer talks about this information coming to Abraham as that, "which at the time appear[s] to be very casual and insignificant...[yet before] long, [is] found to have a material bearing upon what God...is about to bring to pass."^{iv}

7. Years ago, when I was still a youth pastor, I spent many Friday afternoons playing golf at the Air Castle Golf Course here in Trenton.
8. The man who owned the course at the time shared with me one day about a church whose pastor had been diagnosed with cancer.
9. Something about that story distinctly pricked my heart, and I began to pray for that pastor and that church. Little did I know that the church I was praying for *then* would one day be the very church I now pastor.
10. Call it what you will, but I believe that God was preemptively revealing something to my heart, the full scope of which I would not realize for years to come.
11. Looking at this little text, we are reminded that *we don't always see the reality of God's providence*. Likewise, *we don't always see the revelation of God's plan*.
12. Notice with me a third lesson we draw from this. That is:

III. WE DON'T ALWAYS SEE THE RECORD OF GOD'S POWER

1. In the first part of Genesis chapter 22, the work of God is clear and prominent. He was testing Abraham and moving in His life in a plain and powerful way.
2. The temptation when we come to the end of this chapter is to read this little mundane genealogy and assume that this is somehow *not* the work of God.
3. However, the reality is that God was working just as powerfully in Abraham's life in the news of Nahor's family as He was when provided the ram at the top of the mountain.
4. Just because you can't see the power of God in a particular episode of life doesn't mean He is not working behind the scenes.
5. Consider the record of God's power as it is seen in this passage. First of all, we are reminded here that:

A. Sometimes God moves in undistinguished ways

1. There is no grand narrative here, no great test of faith, no dramatic mountain climb, no altar, and no voice from heaven. Just a word from a distant land about a family Abraham had long ago left behind.
2. And yet, as we have seen, this news from home would prove to be critical in the future of all of Abraham's descendents.

3. Sometimes, God *does* move in miraculous ways. Sometimes, He is pleased to show His power in great demonstrations and deliverances.

4. At other times, in fact, *at many times*, God is just as pleased to move and work through the everyday, normal, seemingly commonplace happenings of life.

5. Pastor Mark Dever, commenting on the book of Esther, says something that sheds light on this truth. He writes:

“You may have missed God’s dramatic role in this book because he does not act in the same spectacular fashion that He does in other points in the Old Testament...But here he works *providentially* – through the normal actions of people in the normal order of life...God works sovereignly with no apparent miracles, just a lot of ‘happenings’ and just the right ‘circumstances.’”^v

6. Right now, you may be waiting on God to do something spectacular and fantastic in your life. You may be looking for His work to reveal itself with a flash and a bang.

7. But, it could be that God is working in your life right now in less distinguished and pronounced ways. He may use a conversation with a friend at work, or a flat tire, or a new neighbor to show you His power.

8. God can do the miraculous and the supernatural, no doubt! However, He can do just as much with the mundane and the simple.

9. Sometimes, God moves in undistinguished ways. Furthermore, we don’t always see the record of His power because:

B. Sometimes God moves in undisclosed ways

1. As I pondered over this little text, I saw something that intrigued me. Look again at verse 20. It says, “*And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor.*”

2. After this we are given the list of names, most of which sound funny, and some of which we can’t even pronounce.

3. There is, however, another person in this text, whose name we are not given. Notice it says, “it was told [to] Abraham”.

4. My question was, “*Who* told Abraham?” It does not appear that it was God who told him. Whenever God spoke to Abraham, we are specifically told that it was God speaking.

5. No, apparently there was some anonymous messenger who brought this good news to Abraham. God does not see fit, however, to disclose that messenger to us.

6. Likewise, there are times when God works in our lives and we don't even know about it! For whatever reason, He does not see fit to disclose to us what He has done, or how He has done it.

7. You look back over your life, and it is likely that you cannot trace all the ways in which you got to where you are. You may see some of God's handiwork, but you can't see it all!

8. My point is that even when you can't see the power of God at work, even when you feel that He is doing absolutely nothing; that does not mean that He is not mightily working on your behalf!

9. It could be that He just chosen to work in an undisclosed way and that He does not want to show you all He is doing. You probably wouldn't believe it if He did.

10. Who knows? God might have spared you from a car wreck this morning in what seemed to you to be an uneventful trip.

11. Who knows? God may have led someone into your path this week to whom you spoke an encouraging word, not realizing what a difference it made in their life.

12. Corey Ten Boom said, "Though I cannot always trace Him; I can always trust Him." He may never disclose what He is doing, but that does not mean He is not doing it!

1. It could be that like this little text at the close of this great chapter, right now you don't feel like God is really up to anything in your life. Perhaps it all seems kind of boring and uneventful.

2. Truth be told, you ought to look more closely. It could be that what seems mundane to you now will turn out to be monumental in your life!

3. Psalm 107:43 says this, "*Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.*"

4. God often moves in ways men do not immediately recognize. The greatest example of this is His Son Jesus.

5. Isaiah 53:2 says of Him, *“For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.”*

6. For some thirty years the Son of God lived a quiet life in the backwater village of Nazareth. Apart from his mother and earthly father, no one seemed to take much notice of Him.

7. And yet, one day that Son of God and Son of Man would leave the wood of the carpenter’s shop and head toward the wood of the cross on which He would forever change the history of the world.

8. Look closely at what God is doing now, and don’t miss the glory of what He is going to do!

ⁱ Candlish, Robert, Studies in Genesis, (A. and C. Black, Edinburgh, 1868), *Amazon Kindle Edition*

ⁱⁱ Green, Lauren, “Christianity in China”, 1/20/2011, www.foxnews.com, accessed 10/13/2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/01/20/christianity-china/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Swindoll, Charles, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart, (Word Publishing, Nashville, 1998), p. 243

^{iv} Candlish, Robert

^v Dever, Mark, The Message of the Old Testament, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2006), p. 455