

Genesis

³⁴So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. ³⁵The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. ³⁷My master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; ³⁸but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’

⁴²“I came today to the spring, and said, ‘O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, “Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,” ⁴⁴and who will say to me, “Drink, and I will draw for your camels also”—let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master’s son.’ ⁴⁵“Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ ⁴⁶She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. ⁴⁷Then I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ She said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him.’ So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.”

⁵⁸And they called Rebekah, and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.” ⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. ⁶⁰And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, “May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.” ⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

⁶²Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, “Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?” The servant said, “It is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He

took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Romans

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Matthew 11: 16-30

¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

After the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence in 1776, John Adams wrote to his wife, *"I believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival... it ought to be celebrated by pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other..."*

Independence Day is indeed a time for celebration. It has always been one of my favorite holidays. I think that is because first it is in the summer, and as a kid summer seemed like the best time of the year. No school. And second, because there were fireworks. Growing up, fireworks fascinated me. We didn't have big fireworks displays when I was a kid in Oklahoma. At least, I don't remember any. The Fourth of July was a hands-on holiday in my youth. We earned the money. We bought the fireworks. And we set them off ourselves. Usually when our parents weren't around.

I had a good guardian angel as a kid, because I still have all my fingers and toes, and my eyes and ears still function pretty well. There *are* a few scars and burn marks here and there, but hey - guardian angels can only do so much.

Independence Day is a time for celebrating the freedom America gained over 200 years ago, a time to celebrate the freedoms we have continued to enjoy down to the present, and the sacrifice that so many have made to keep it that way. We give thanks for the good things we have in America, and if we are in a reflective mood we may spend some time thinking about what, in the year 2005, is right and wrong with our country.

If you read the newspaper, watch the news on TV, listen to radio, or surf the Internet - it is easy to find many people who are thinking about, writing about, and speaking about America. It seems like everyone has an opinion about what America is doing right or is doing wrong. And it seems like everyone wants to share their opinion with you, and everyone else for that matter. It's not just Americans either; it seems like people around the world are also a part of the conversation.

Maybe it's the times we are living in. After all, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan raise powerful emotions in many people. Is America doing the right thing in Iraq? Are we winning the war with the insurgents? Should we be in Afghanistan? Is it time to bring American troops home, or should they stay there? What should we do to combat terrorism here and abroad?

Those are tough questions. Some persons believe that God is on the America's side. You have heard that said, I'm sure. I think that is on many people's minds these days. When BYU plays Notre Dame in football - you know what people are thinking, even if they don't say it out loud. Whose side is God on? Is God on BYU's side? Or Notre Dame's? You won't know the answer until the game is over.

In my opinion, people who ask whether God is on America's side are asking the wrong question. I think the right question to ask is not "Is God on America's side?", but "Is

America on God's side?" When I reflect on our country this Fourth of July, that is the question I am asking.

Another way of saying it is "What would Jesus do?" What would Jesus do if he was here in America today? That is an excellent way of looking at the issues. How would Jesus handle the problems our country faces today? Unfortunately, the phrase "What would Jesus do?" has been trivialized and mocked by some, but the question remains a valid one for Christians. If sometime this weekend between the cookouts, the camping, and the fireworks, you end up reflecting on America - perhaps you should ask your self "What *would* Jesus do?"

This morning's scripture reading from Genesis is a wonderful story of the history of the Israelites, the story of Isaac and Rebekah. It is sort of a love story - maybe not like Romeo and Juliet, but a love story nonetheless. When the story begins, Abraham is an old man. His wife Sarah has died. And his son Isaac - that's right, the very same Isaac that he had almost sacrificed years ago - is all grown up.

Abraham decides that it is time for Isaac to find a wife and get married. So he summons a servant and ask the servant to go back to the old country where Abraham had come from, and find a wife for Isaac. Abraham, as you may remember, had come from Ur in what is now days Iraq, and then left and settled in Canaan. But Abraham didn't want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman, he wanted him to marry someone from the old country.

The servant leaves in a caravan of camels and heads to Ur. When he gets there, the servant prays to God. "Help me find the right woman", he prays. The servant ask God to pick the right woman by having her come over and offer him water for his camels. And sure enough, here came Rebekah and offered to water the camels. The servant - seeing his prayer answered - asks Rebekah if they could stay the night with her family. So Rebekah takes them home to meet the family. The servant tells the story to Rebekah's brother Laban and her father Bethuel. When he is done, they ask Rebekah if she wants to go and be Isaacs wife, and she agrees.

Now at this point I think that the story has been shortened some. The reason I say that is that it doesn't seem to take very long for Rebekah to say yes to the marriage proposal, and that doesn't seem very realistic to me. It took me a whole lot longer to convince my wife to marry me, so this looks *way* too easy to be true. After all, she has never seen Isaac, doesn't know anything about him, and doesn't even know where he lives. She must know that she will be leaving her family, probably forever. But she doesn't seem to hesitate at all before saying yes. Maybe things were different back then. The story ends when Rebekah returns to meet Isaac, and they marry. It says "He took Rebekah, and she became

his wife; and he loved her.” The biblical version of “And they lived happily ever after.”

What can we learn from this story? Well, I guess we could use this story as an example of someone who trusted in God to provide. The servant prayed to God and his prayer was answered. Rebekah trusted in God to provide her with a good husband, and her trust was rewarded. Another thing to take from this story is how much different things are today than they were in the time of Isaac and Rebekah, at least here in America. Can you imagine your father sending a hired hand to another country to find you a wife - without you even knowing about it? Can you imagine accepting a marriage proposal like Rebekah did, from a stranger that shows up one day out of the blue? How about spending your days hauling water out of a well in a large clay pot? Or traveling across the desert with a caravan of camels? They may still do these things in some part of the world, but it seems totally alien to us today.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah may seem foreign to us, but I’ll bet the scripture reading from Romans is very familiar. It’s familiar to me. Not so much that I have the scripture passages memorized or anything like that, but because when Paul speaks about his dilemma, he is speaking about me. Listen to how Paul describes it: *19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* That describes me to a T. No matter how hard I try, I can’t always do the things that I know are right.

I’ll bet that you are the same way too. I know that my health would be better if I didn’t have that second serving of dessert - but I do it anyway. I know that it would be better to go for a walk after supper - but I plop down in front of the TV instead. Isn’t Paul describing human nature when he talks about “not doing the good I want”? Isn’t this the way we all are? I think it is. We all make mistakes and we all have our bad habits. That reminds me of a story.

Kirk was walking down the street when he was accosted by a particularly dirty and shabby-looking homeless man, who asked him for a couple of dollars for dinner. Kirk took out his wallet, extracted ten dollars and asked, "If I give you this money, will you buy some beer with it instead?" "No, I had to stop drinking years ago," the homeless man replied.

"Will you use it to gamble instead of buying food?" Kirk asked. "No, I don't gamble," the homeless man said. "I need everything I can get just to stay alive."

"Will you spend this on greens fees at a golf course instead of food? Kirk asked. "Are you NUTS?!" replied the homeless man. "I haven't played golf in 20 years."

"Well," said Kirk, "I'm not going to give you the money. Instead, I'm going to take you home for a terrific dinner cooked by my wife." The homeless man was astounded, "Won't your wife be furious with you for doing that? I know I'm dirty, and I probably smell pretty

disgusting."

Kirk replied, "That's okay. I just want her to see what a man looks like who's given up beer, gambling, and golf."

I can imagine what that dinner must have been like.

To hear Paul talk, it seems hopeless that we will ever be able to behave the way God wants us to behave. We seem to be unable to will ourselves to do the right thing every time. What are we to do?

Well, listen to the words of Jesus from Matthew. ²⁸*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

That is one of the most comforting and hopeful passages in all of the Bible, and probably one of the most loved sayings of Jesus. . ²⁸*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Who isn't weary, and who doesn't want to rest? Who isn't stressed, or guilt ridden, exhausted with the world - tired of trying to keep up with a world that seems to just keep moving faster?*

Jesus is talking about the people of Israel who have been coming to see and hear him and John the Baptist. He compares them to children playing in the streets. He says that when they played the flute, no one danced, and when they wailed, no one mourned. He expands on this idea, saying that the people didn't like John because he was too strict. And the same people think that Jesus is not strict enough. After all Jesus eats with tax collectors and heals on the Sabbath. He didn't uphold the Jewish laws that many, especially the ruling elite, thought were necessary for salvation.

Jesus's reply is the passage I just read to you. He tells them that the road to salvation, the road to peace, doesn't come from strict adherence to dietary laws, or from avoiding the downtrodden and unclean in society. True peace and salvation comes from taking on the yoke of Jesus, listening to what Jesus taught, and believing in his power to save and heal.

Jesus may have been talking about the too-strict observance of Jewish law when he spoke this passage over two thousand years ago, but the words have resonated down through the ages. ²⁸*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Pray with me: Dear God, take the heavy burdens from us and let us have rest and peace. Teach us how to put down the loads we carry and experience the true peace and joy that come from taking up the yoke that Jesus has offered us. We ask all this in his name.
Amen.