

October 20, 2024 (Lesson 8)

SARAH: MATRIARCH OF ISRAEL

1. **Sarah Faithfully Follows Abraham** (Genesis 12:1-9; 1 Peter 3:3-6)
2. **Sarah Is Blessed by God** (Genesis 17:15-19)
3. **By Faith, Sarah Receives the Promise** (Genesis 18:9-15; Hebrews 11:11-12)

Central Truth: God rewards those who exercise faith in His promises.

Focus: Highlight Sarah's faith in receiving God's promise and be confident in His promises to us.

Evangelism Emphasis: Sinners who place their trust in Jesus Christ will be saved.

Golden Text: "Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11).

Sarah. List all the girls and women you know who were given that name by their parents. For many decades, and even centuries, it was one of the most popular Biblical names conferred on baby girls. Only in the past twenty years has there been a marked decline in its usage.

Sarah is a well-known figure in the Biblical narrative, as recorded in Genesis, where she is frequently associated with her husband, Abraham. There is a tendency to give minimal consideration to her role in God's redemptive plan through the nation of Israel, which culminated in the birth of Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of humanity.

While studying Sarah's actions and words, it is vital to remember the cultural context in which she lived. In this Oriental, patriarchal society, the husband stood as the legal and spiritual head of the family. The oldest male made the decisions for the entire extended family (clan). In spite of this limiting environment, Sarah became a woman of distinction as the mother of Isaac, the covenant son.

This series of lessons emphasizes eight women whose lives and actions qualify them as godly, despite the challenges they faced. Sarah, more than any of the other seven, wrestled with the temptation to follow the options of culture in an attempt to bring fulfillment to her husband and family life.

Sarah's life provides an example of a person being rewarded by God as a result of having faith in His promises. It took time, but in the end she could be labeled as the matriarch of Israel. This should remind us of the relationship between God's promises and our responsibilities.

1. SARAH FAITHFULLY FOLLOWS ABRAHAM

A. Leaving Family and Country (Genesis 12:1-9)

¹ Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: ² And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: ³ And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. ⁴ So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. ⁶ And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. ⁷ And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him.

The narrative of God's calling and covenant with Abraham includes Sarah. In verse 5, she was part of the family leaving the city of Haran and entering the land of Canaan. We must never see her as an afterthought brought into the account because God needed a woman to bear Isaac, the covenant child. God's selection of Abraham included Sarah from the beginning.

Their journey from Ur of the Chaldees, then to Haran, and finally into the Promised Land was challenging. They left a "city of about 150 acres with an estimated population of some 24,000. It included two-story houses, a city sewer system, and neatly laid out streets. . . . Ur has been found to have been a city of literacy, culture; and findings have included tablets that were dictionaries, grammar books, mathematical tables, calculations in square and cube roots, cuneiform writing, and

copybooks for learners” (*The Pentateuch*, L. Thomas Holdcroft). Ur had a harbor on the Euphrates River, and was a center of trade and industry.

In spite of the city’s progress, Ur was steeped in great spiritual darkness. Its name indicated a dedication to Nanna, the moon god. Nanna stood as the supreme god in the Mesopotamian pantheon of gods. The people considered this god to be the source of fertility for crops, herds, and families. They offered prayers for his blessing.

We have no record of how Abraham and Sarah were spiritually lifted out of this idolatry and put into relationship with the true God, Jehovah. In the patriarchal society, a man’s wife and children followed his particular spiritual choices. Regretfully, we have no record of Sarah’s spiritual understanding and commitments. We must assume she was in harmony with God’s intentions. Otherwise, why would she be selected for such a high honor?

There is no hint of her being resistant to the journey and relocation into a primitive, rural lifestyle. She faithfully followed Abraham. We know Sarah was ten years younger than her husband (Gen. 17:17). Assuming she married at the normal age for young ladies in the society (latter teens), she and Abraham would have been married for well over forty years upon moving to Canaan.

Some of the details of the move to Canaan should be considered. There wasn’t just a husband and wife, a few servants, and a small number of livestock. Their initial migration included other family members and possessions. No explanation is given for their stopping in Haran for an unspecified period of time (11:31). However, Terah (Abraham’s father and head of the family) died, and then the journey to Canaan continued (v. 32). It was a growing entourage (12:5), but this chosen family continued to be childless.

In what may have been a response to the Canaanites possessing the land (v. 6), God appeared and reassured Abraham. The covenant was still intact; Abraham and Sarah’s descendants would

inherit/possess the land (v. 7). Abraham then built an altar and worshiped the Lord (vv. 7-8) before heading south (v. 9).

—*According to verse 3, who will be “blessed” and who will be “cursed”? How widespread did God intend this blessing to be?*

B. Living as Sarah’s Daughters (1 Peter 3:3-6)

³ Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; ⁴ But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. ⁵ For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: ⁶ Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.

The spiritual quality of Sarah as a woman and a wife is seen clearly in these verses. She demonstrated modesty and beauty not only on the physical exterior but also from within. In themselves, caring for one’s hair, wearing appropriate jewelry, and nice clothing are not sinful. But, genuine beauty comes from within and isn’t dependent on physical adornments, which do not last. Clothes wear out. Jewelry tarnishes, and can be lost or stolen. Our physical attributes, including the hairs on our head, diminish in time.

Real beauty, which Sarah demonstrated, comes from within. Her quiet, gentle, and submissive spirit spoke loudly as to her genuineness. It didn’t reflect not having a mind of her own to think and to plan for their future. Instead, it speaks of her being a supportive wife within the cultural environment of her society. Her submission to her husband, Abraham, was in no sense an act of inferiority or lack of ability.

Inner beauty reveals itself in our speech, spirit, mannerisms, and even bodily movements. Regretfully, both men and women can become so consumed with the issues of outer beauty that

their inner self may be overlooked. Appearance becomes the most important measurement, while attitudes and actions are overlooked or placed on a secondary level of priority.

Under divine guidance, the Apostle Peter included Sarah's example for others to follow regardless of the century or culture in which they lived. Women who faithfully live a life of holiness can be seen as the daughters of Sarah. These verses also should serve as a guide for men in selecting a wife and teaching their daughters.

The Significance of Sarah

A quick Google search for a listing of impactful people named Sarah brought up a listing of 100 names. The list included actresses, recording artists, a presidential press secretary, royalty, musicians, and comedians. The list also included a vaccinologist, politicians, athletes, and an attorney. Despite all their accomplishments, none come close to the importance of Sarah, the mother of a new redemptive nation from which the Savior, Jesus Christ, was born.

2. SARAH IS BLESSED BY GOD

A. New Name (Genesis 17:15-16)

¹⁵ And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. ¹⁶ And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

Do you know why your parents selected the name which is on your birth certificate? These are some of the most common responses: named after a family member, a parent's special friend, a well-known athlete, a popular entertainer, or a national leader.

In the Oriental culture, a person's name was considered to be intimately related to the child's personality and future. To a certain degree, it was thought to determine what he or she would become and accomplish. A person's name could be changed to reflect new accomplishments or positions.

Sarah's being blessed of God (v. 16) is part of another encounter between God and Abraham. On this occasion, God reaffirmed the previous covenant and instituted male circumcision as a sign of those participating within it (v. 10). Twenty-four years had passed since the covenant of a promised land and descendants was first given (12:1-5). However, in haste or desperation, Sarah had suggested the covenant child be conceived through a physical union between one of her maids (Hagar) and Abraham (16:1-2).

How could Sarah even suggest her husband should have sexual relations with one of the female servants? Here is an example of being tempted and succumbing to a cultural pattern. Excavations of the city of Nuzi have uncovered tablets stating an unusual type of marriage contract. In it, the legal view of marriage was to produce children. Marriage contracts indicated how a barren wife was to give a servant to her husband to produce a child. Any servant who did this was to remain with the family for the rest of her life.

Sarah and Abraham followed this pattern even without a marriage contract. It resulted in the birth of Ishmael, father of the Arab nation (v. 15). God then remained silent for thirteen years until it was impossible for Abraham and Sarah to conceive a child. At this point, God reaffirmed Canaan being an everlasting possession (17:8) and having "many" descendants (v. 4). God had not rejected Sarah and Abraham for their faltering faith and attempting to take matters in their own hands. But, He did make them wait and experience major ramifications for their actions.

Abraham (formally known as Abram) had his name changed (vv. 4-5). *Abram* means "high father," while *Abraham* means "father of a multitude." It continued the thought of a multitude of descendants, which an angel had said would be numerous as the stars (15:5). He had no numerical sense of this. (It is estimated there are about 100,000 million stars in our Milky Way alone!)

God also addressed the position of Sarah. He changed her name from *Sarai* (princely) to *Sarah* (princess). It indicates she was a part of the covenant and would bear a son. Her physically dead womb would be rejuvenated, and she would become the mother of nations with ruling kings.

—*Why does the Lord sometimes give people a “new name,” as He did for Sarai?*

B. Supernatural Promise (Genesis 17:17-19)

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? ¹⁸ And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! ¹⁹ And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

In response to what seemed outlandish for them—to become parents—Abraham fell down on the ground and laughed within his heart. It sounded preposterous. Two exceptionally old people would become parents? Abraham offered a counter proposal, saying Ishmael could be the covenant child (v. 18). Note how firmly God responded saying Sarah would be the mother of this special son, who was to be named *Isaac*, meaning “laughter” (v. 19).

Abraham’s request was not too unusual when considering the circumstances. A surrogate birth had produced a child whom they mistakenly thought could be the covenant child. Apparently, Abraham thought Sarah was no longer in the equation because of her age. But now, everything was supernaturally turned upside-down. Ishmael was not the long-awaited son; Sarah would miraculously birth the long-awaited child.

So, where did that place Ishmael? He was a growing boy loved by his father, Abraham. What would be his future? That would become clearer later, in chapter 21.

What would the future hold for Isaac? The everlasting covenant which had been established with Abraham would be inherited by Isaac. This would be fulfilled some time after his marriage to Rebekah (26:2-5). God stated the covenant would also apply to the descendants of Isaac (17:19).

What a promise of reassurance to Abraham in the middle of an unbelievable change of plans and perspective!

This is a reminder that all along Sarah was a vital part of God's redemptive plan. Both she and Abraham had to go through periods of faith development and acceptance of God's plan.

—Has God even given you a promise that almost seemed laughable, yet you saw it fulfilled? Or is there an improbable promise to which you are still clinging?

3. BY FAITH, SARAH RECEIVES THE PROMISE

A. Nothing Too Hard for God (Genesis 18:9-15)

¹⁰ And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? ¹³ And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? ¹⁴ Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.

In the previous section, God revealed to Abraham that Sarah would be the mother of the covenant son, Isaac. The Lord emphasized the covenant would be continued with this still-to-be-born son. In obedience to God's directive that all men within the covenant were to be circumcised, Abraham, Ishmael, and the other males of his household followed this rite (17:23-27).

At a later occasion, God made it specifically known to Sarah of her special distinction and motherhood in the near future (18:10). It is easy to bypass this part and emphasize the three heavenly messengers who announced the soon destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 16-20). Attached to that, we find Abraham bargaining with God. The bargain was not on the basis of future acts of righteousness but, rather, a current status of holiness (vv. 23-32).

Such pleading with God is also seen in Isaiah 38, when King Hezekiah was gravely ill. God sent the prophet Isaiah to inform Hezekiah of his soon death. Hezekiah responded by turning his face to the wall and asking God to remember his walking in truth with a loyal heart and doing what was good (vv. 2-3).

Prior to announcing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, there was a message for Sarah. Her whereabouts were questioned, and Abraham's response indicated a normal cultural position. Women stayed in the family tent while the men ate and fellowshiped. Genesis 18:10 indicates she remained out of sight but could hear the conversation.

Family tents typically were oblong and divided into three sections—one for the men, one for the women, and one for baggage. As the family grew, new sections were added to their tent house, which could be handed down from generation to generation. The men's section of the tent was the place to entertain visitors. Due to the heat, they frequently gathered and ate under the shade of a tree (v. 8). In this arrangement, the wife could stay hidden at the entrance to the tent and still be party to the conversation. Verse 10 indicates that is exactly what Sarah was doing.

For a second time, Abraham hears of Sarah bearing a son in the near future. This announcement was for her benefit. Her initial response was the same as Abraham's had been (17:17). When questioned concerning it, she denied having laughed. Fear was governing her response. But she was firmly reminded of her action (18:15).

Sarah's inner laughter stemmed from a biological reality. She was eighty-nine years old and long past the possibility of conceiving and carrying a child in her womb. At that point, she faced the question "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" (v. 14). Nothing stands as impossible due to His being omnipotent (all-powerful). The issue usually revolves around our human struggle with faith.

Just because God can do something, doesn't mean He will. He knows what is best for us, what accomplishes His will, and what will bring glory to who He is.

The Christian Life

The Christian life is a miracle, and every phase of it ought to bear the mark of the supernatural.—Vance Havner

B. Innumerable Descendants (Hebrews 11:11-12)

¹¹ Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

Our final consideration for this lesson looks at Sarah being included in Hebrews 11, which often is referred to as “the hall of faith.” The writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, begins with a definition of *faith*. Following this definition, sixteen individuals are mentioned by name. Other individuals are not named, but their actions receive notation. Some of the people of faith are given several verses describing the context in which they exercised faith.

The inclusion of Sarah in this list speaks loudly as to the quality of her faith. Her name being listed in the section emphasizing Abraham's faith actions does not take away from her action of faith. They were the husband and wife God chose to be the parents of a child through whose lineage the Messiah would be born as the God-man.

Verse 11 speaks of why Sarah qualified to be included in this listing of heroes and heroines of faith. Some have suggested her inner laughing upon hearing she would bear a child at her age and physical condition should disqualify her for this honor. Others suggest her inclusion comes as part of being married to God's chosen person. However, those ideas miss the strong statement of Sarah exercising her own faith in response to God's stating she would bear a son. Keep in mind

Abraham's lapses in faith did not keep him from being the man to father a multitude of descendants.

Faith doesn't simply become a reality in our life by our knowing about God and doing the right things. This can be seen in verse 1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is a choice, commitment, and a concentrated trust. Sarah chose to believe her body would be rejuvenated and capable to conceive and bear a child. Her commitment to this future event had its foundation on God's faithfulness to accomplish His promises.

Remember, Sarah and Abraham had journeyed together from Ur to Canaan. Since arriving in Canaan thirty-four years earlier, she had been protected when taken into the harems of foreign rulers. When she became knowledgeable of God's plan for her to miraculously become a mother, it must have been a short time until her faith blossomed. She became the matriarch of Israel.

It's a fallacy to believe faith must be a long, complicated process. For some this is true. But many other believers grasp God's truths and promises in a short period of time. They might become giants of faith worthy of also being mentioned along with Sarah.

—*What is the connection between "faith" and "faithful" in verse 11?*

SIX KEY POINTS

This lesson is more than a travelogue of Sarah's journey from Ur of the Chaldees to the promised land of Canaan. It highlights God's choice of Sarah to be the mother of the covenant son, Isaac. However, it is much more.

First, this lesson reminds us of God's making a covenant with Abraham and fulfilling His word. Second, it points to God's selecting a specific husband-and-wife team to be the instruments for beginning the redemptive nation of Israel.

Third, God knows the right time to fulfill His will, regardless of how impossible or daunting the circumstances may seem. Fourth, God doesn't withdraw His call on people's lives due to human fallacies or even sinful choices.

Fifth, faith enables us to enter the fullness of God's intentions for us. Sixth, our all-powerful God doesn't see human liabilities as restrictions which cannot be reversed.

Daily Devotions

- M. God Blesses Noah (Genesis 9:1-11)
- T. God Is David's Refuge (Psalm 61:1-8)
- W. God Delivers Daniel's Friends (Daniel 3:16-18, 24-25)
- T. Healed by Touching Jesus' Garment (Matthew 9:18-22)
- F. Promise of the Father Fulfilled (Acts 2:1-4)
- S. Salvation Assured to Those Who Believe (Romans 10:9-13)