

Sarah: Faith in God's Promises

When we read the list of great people of faith in Hebrews chapter 11, some of them seem quite unusual to us. This is because they are chosen and viewed from God's point of view. In the case of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, her inclusion in the list is because she believed God's promises and had a son. But there is a whole story to this.

Beauty and Deception

Sarah was married to Abraham and played an important role in his life. The family group left Haran when Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65. Arriving in the land of Israel (then called Canaan) Abraham was driven down into Egypt by a famine.

Sarah was beautiful, even in old age, and Abraham was afraid that he would be killed so that someone could take his attractive wife. They made a pact that they would describe Sarah as his sister (she was in fact his half-sister) rather than his wife.

So in Egypt, because the couple carried out the deception, Sarah ended up in Pharaoh's harem. God brought great plagues on Pharaoh's household as a consequence. When eventually the ruler found the cause of his trouble, he confronted Abraham about his deception.

Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" (Genesis 12:18).

Sarah must have been very beautiful, and by now, very embarrassed.

We get the impression that Sarah was a very strong-minded person, and knew what she wanted. She was happy to lie about her relationship to her husband and when they make that arrangement, the text reads as if Abraham is pleading with Sarah, as if she is the stronger character (Genesis 12:12-13).

God promised a child to Abraham and Sarah, and Abraham was told that he would father a great nation and a special descendant, who would be a blessing to the whole world.

Yet in Genesis chapter 15, we read of a crisis of confidence for Abraham. Well into his eighties, and still with no child to carry on the family name, Abraham suggested to God that his head steward take on his name and the family business. God refused Abraham's request and sent him outside to count the stars:

Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them... so shall your descendants be (Genesis 15:5).



To believe a promise like that takes a lot of faith, especially when you are approaching 85, and childless!

Eventually, frustration and disappointment got the better of Sarah, and she suggested to Abraham that he take a concubine from among their slaves: Hagar the Egyptian (Genesis 15). When they put this plan into action, things really went wrong.

Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife, not just a concubine. The problem was that, according to the custom of the land, if a man had no children, and took a younger wife who then gave birth to a child, this child became the family heir. Then the junior wife took the place of the senior wife in the household.

Hagar began to scorn Sarah for her childlessness, and to usurp her place in the household; Sarah was having none of this. Abraham and Sarah had a fearsome argument, where Sarah blamed Abraham for everything that had gone wrong, and insisted that Hagar be thrown out of the house to make her own way in the world.

This was most distressing to Abraham. But God is not unkind, and an angel met Hagar to comfort her and promise that her son would prosper. He sent her back to be obedient to Sarah, and bear the child she was carrying. When Hagar's child was born, Abraham called him Ishmael. Sarah was now 76 years old.

The Princess and Her Son

Some years later she was given the name 'Sarah' by God (she was known as Sarai up to this point). Sarah means 'princess' and was very appropriate as she was to be the mother of Abraham's descendants, the princess of his dynasty. Like Mary, the mother of

Jesus, we can imagine her asking, "How shall this be?"

One day (Genesis 18) God sent three men to visit Abraham as he sat in the door of his tent in the heat of the day. This incident is really more about Sarah than about Abraham. She was working just inside the tent, while Abraham greeted his visitors and offered them food and drink, according to the custom of the day.



While the men were enjoying the meal, with Abraham playing the role of host, the men asked where Sarah was. Abraham told them that she was there in the tent. The men told Abraham that Sarah would have a son, and she heard from inside the tent door, just behind them. She was incredulous – she was at least 89, after all! She laughed inside herself – but the messenger (actually an angel) heard and rebuked her:

Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?" Is anything too hard for the Lord? (Genesis 18:13–14).

Sarah was really frightened, and tried to deny that she laughed; but the angel knew that she did, and repeated his message that Sarah would have a son, at about the same time next year.

And so it happened, at the age of 90, she was given strength to bear a son, a child of promise – promised by God (Genesis 21). The child was aptly named Isaac, meaning ‘God has made me laugh’. Isaac was extraordinarily special, the son of promise they had waited for, over so many long years.

Trouble in the Household

Soon we find a clash between the two boys, Ishmael and Isaac, at the big celebration when Isaac was weaned. It was a celebration for Sarah, and Hagar and her son, now a teenager, found all the attention focused on the younger child. Since the birth of Isaac, the position of Ishmael as potential heir of the family had been seriously diminished, if not removed altogether. Along with it went Hagar’s importance as a ‘senior wife in waiting’.



So, during the celebrations, Ishmael mocked and derided the interloper, taking Abraham’s attention away from Isaac, and drawing it to himself.

Sarah was enraged: Hagar and Ishmael must go, and go now! Sarah called Ishmael “*the son of this bond-woman (slave)*”; she would not even speak his name. Her son was not going to be a joint-heir with Ishmael: the inheritance must be Isaac’s, and Isaac’s alone!

The Promises

So, was Sarah right, or just hurt and angry? She was right, for God told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, “*for in Isaac your seed shall be called*” (Genesis 21:12). From Isaac, through a long line of direct descendants, we eventually reach the Lord Jesus Christ. So, for Sarah, God’s promise came true in a wonderful way.

The Letter to the Hebrews provides commentary and a summary of Sarah’s story:

By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised (Hebrews 11:11).

Sarah believed that God was ‘faithful’, that He would fulfil the promises He had made. This applied in the first instance to the birth of Isaac as we have read. But God’s promises go further, speaking about the nation of Israel who were descended from Isaac, and pointing to the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all men and women can have a special relationship with God.

Jesus will soon return to the earth and set up God’s kingdom, where faithful men and women will live for ever. If we want to be there, we need to show the same faith that God will fulfil His promises – and He always does.

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