

# Sarah

She made mistakes. Some were big mistakes. Yet she is commended as an example to follow.

We are not taught to make the mistakes Sarah made. Rather we are to learn from what she did. In particular, we to see that Sarah's unbelief was replaced by belief.

## **Promise**

It is her faith which is commended in Hebrews 11 verse 11. What did she come to believe? That God is faithful. He gave a promise. Sarah reckoned he would keep it.

We shall take a closer look at her faith in a moment. First we need to consider the mistakes she made. The reason we do so is simply stated. We need to see how she changed. The best way to do that is to compare what she became with what she was.

As indicated above, Sarah's life on some occasions was marked more by unbelief than faith. Ours can be the same.

Sarah was Abraham's wife. Like him she started her days in Ur of the Chaldees, an important city-state located in the part of the world we now call Iraq. It was some 4000 years ago she, her

husband and other relatives began the long journey west to Canaan. When she did so she was aware her husband had been spoken to by God. She therefore knew of God's existence. That he had made himself known and revealed his will. Sarah and Abraham were to love and serve him. They were to depend upon him at all times, knowing he will provide.

## **Provide**

This last point - trusting God to provide - is very important. It lies at the heart of faith. We therefore need to ask what place it has in our lives. Are we sufficiently aware God provides for his people?

A careful reading of Psalm 23 shows this to be the case. We may find ourselves in some very difficult situations. We may even walk through the valley of the shadow of death (*Psalm 23.4*) yet we should not be afraid. God will be with us. He will lead us. And he will sustain us. All this Sarah should have known. And all this Sarah was to cling on to and let influence her life - her thinking and her acts.

## **Problems**

God's promise to Abraham (and therefore also to Sarah) was that he would be made 'a great nation'. In Abraham 'all the families of the earth' were to be 'blessed' (*Genesis 12.2f*). The problem was he and Sarah had no children. And that situation grew more difficult for them the older they got. So how would God fulfil his promise? That question evidently arose in Sarah's mind. It must have preoccupied her to a degree. It led her to make a mistake.

## **Prevented**

Some ten years after she had settled in Canaan (*Genesis 16.3*), Sarah decided to solve the problem of having no children. She made a suggestion to Abraham. What we should also note is how she made her suggestion seem reasonable.

Her suggestion was that Abraham should father a child by Hagar, Sarah's servant. The reason given was: 'the Lord has prevented me from having children' (*Genesis 16.1f*). She was surely right to link her failure to conceive with the providence of God. She was wrong to come up with a 'solution' that side-stepped her.

Yes, she knew that her biological clock was ticking. She also knew that both she and her husband were not getting younger but older. Therefore, from the human point of view it looked more and more likely they would remain childless. Hence her use of the word 'prevented'.

However, we are not called to rely on our own insights or ideas. Yes we are to use our minds. We are to think. But we are to subject our thinking to God's wisdom. We are to remember his promises. And we are to believe that he will fulfil his plans and purposes. At this point in Sarah's life she fails. Her life is marked more by unbelief than belief. The same is so often the case with us.

## **Pretence**

Unbelief did not rear its ugly head only once in Sarah's life. Sadly, it is all too frequently seen in our lives as well. Later, when Abraham received a message from God whilst he was camped in the vicinity of 'the oaks of

Mamre' (*Genesis 18.1*), Sarah once again allowed unbelief to influence her behaviour.

The promise of God was restated. Abraham was to be 'the father of a multitude of nations' (*Genesis 17.4-6*). Moreover Sarah would have a son (*Genesis 17.16*).

Whilst Abraham entertained three messengers from God, Sarah listened to what was said at the tent door. The message was clear. In a year's time Abraham's 'wife shall have a son' (*Genesis 18.10*). How did Sarah react? She laughed. She 'laughed to herself, saying, "after I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"' (*Genesis 18.12*).

What Sarah did was similar to what Abraham did earlier. When he first heard the prediction of Isaac's birth he 'fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"' (*Genesis 17.17*).

It is clear, then, that any of us can doubt the word of God. We should not imagine it was only Sarah who made mistakes. Her husband did as well. A careful reading of the records shows that was the case (*see also, for example, Genesis 12.10-20*).

Sarah made things worse. When challenged about her laughter she lied. 'I did not laugh' she asserted (*Genesis 18.15*). A reason is not hard to find. We are told she lied simply because she was afraid. She was rebuked and corrected.

## **Progress**

Perhaps it was from that moment that the progress was made. It certainly looks that way for within weeks she must have conceived. It is clearly stated at the head of genesis 21 'The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he has promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time if which God had spoke to him' (*verses 1f*).

The progress to which we refer is the growth of faith. It blossomed in Sarah's soul. Let us, therefore, note the details given in Hebrews 11.11. The author draws our attention to three facts.

First, Sarah relied upon the promise given. It was no longer something funny, odd or unbelievable. Instead it was real and true. Something to be accepted and believed.

Secondly, Sarah relied upon God who gave the promise. This is a really important point. Why? Because God's people are called upon to entrust themselves with our reserve to God. We can know his word in our minds. But does it affect and influence our hearts?

Believers are called to step out trusting God will provide. They are called to go on trusting even when (from the human point of view) the fulfilment of what is promised looks more and more beset with problems. And they are called to remain trusting even if a fulfilment of the promise looks impossible.

## **Power**

Our confidence is to be in God. It is to be in the God of infinite power and

might. It is to be in the God who always remains true to his word. Sarah saw and believed that God is faithful. The writer of Hebrews says 'she considered him faithful who had promised'.

The thought of God's faithfulness was lost sight of when Sarah suggested to Abraham that he should try for a child with her servant Hagar. It was also lost sight of (albeit temporarily) when she laughed whilst listening at the tent door. But Sarah moved on. She made progress. Her faith matured. Her thinking became more focussed. She came to the settled view that God will do what he promises. Moreover he will do it in his way in his time. Our responsibility is to trust. It is to rely Om him.

Thirdly, Sarah received power from God. The woman who knew what God can do; who waited upon God to do what he said he would do; this woman remained ready to be used by God precisely when he wanted to use her in the fulfilment of his purposes and plans. She submitted herself to God. She did so gladly and wholeheartedly.

## **Purpose**

Why does the author of Hebrews mention Sarah? Some have suggested it is because she was married to Abraham. The impression they give is that she would not be listed along with Abel, Enoch and Noah if she had not been Abraham's wife. That notion is surely wrong.

The reference to Sarah begins in the same way as the references to the men listed. As they did what they did 'by

faith' so did Sarah. She is an example of what it means to have faith in God. More than that, she is an example from whom all of us can learn much.

Sarah's growth in her experience of God and trust in God is an encouragement to us all. We can all be affected by doubts. We all react wrongly on occasions. We can be defensive and resort to lies and deceit when we try to justify the mistakes we make. Yet we can move forward. We can find forgiveness for our failures and unbelief. And we can mature to show forth the faith and reliance and trust God would have his people have in him. We can demonstrate that we are convinced he is able to do far more abundantly than we ask or think (*Ephesians 3.20*).

Sarah's growth in faith is a challenge to us all. It is possible to grow complacent. It is possible to give in to the temptation to take a short cut. Why did Sarah suggest Abraham commit adultery with Hagar? Why did she allow secular thinking to hold sway? Yes, she knew they had both grown old. But the more significant fact is that she drifted from where she should have been.

We would hope that when she set out with Abraham from Ur on the long journey to the land of promise she did so with her spirit fired up with hope and expectation. Our Maker has a purpose for us, she must have said. He has good things in store for us. He will guide and provide. Such thoughts must surely have been in her mind. What when wrong? Why did she give way to unbelief and sin?

None of us is perfect. Believers are new creatures in Christ. The dominance of sin is broken. But we can fall into sin.

Sarah is an example to us of the need to watch ourselves. We need to guard our souls. We must not allow ourselves to drift. That was the danger the recipients of the book of Hebrews faced. It is a danger we face.

What is the solution? It is to walk by faith - as Sarah the wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac did. And what was the fruit of her faith? Verse 11 tells us she conceived. Verse 12 of Hebrews 11 says: 'Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore'.

God's purposes are never thwarted.

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