



Ministry of the Word

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Scripture: Hebrews 11:11&12

Subject: Part 33 – The Power of Faith

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she^[d] bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

In the 5th and 6th Century controversy arose over these two verses. Some thought that from the account in Genesis, Sarah was not a great example of faith so therefore she shouldn't have been in this chapter alongside the great men of faith. But the Holy Spirit did want Sarah there, and this morning we are going to unpack her importance of being here.

But before we get into the details of these particular verses, it's important to go back into Genesis and become reacquainted with Sarah's story. Let's go back to Genesis chapter 12. Sarah is the second women formally mentioned in the Old Testament and was Abraham's wife but also his half-sister. They had the same father but different mothers. That was a permissible custom in those days, but not so today. When Abraham was given the 7-fold promises of God, it was not just for Abraham alone but also for his wife and his posterity. Sarah left the land of Ur with Abraham and it is estimated that she was about 65 years old

when they left. When we read about their story in Genesis, it seems that they loved each other very much but Abraham wasn't always a great example to Sarah. Yes, he was a man of courage and of faith but we also see in the account his cowardice and carnality. I'm sure we can identify with this sometimes more than the courage and faith, while we strive to have courage and faith, we are not always successful.

In Genesis 12, we see that Abraham left the promised land due to a famine and went down to Egypt. This is the first mention of Egypt in verse 11 within the bible. This is where we see the man of faith, leave the place of faith and go down to a place which he didn't belong. Throughout Scripture, Egypt is used as a typology of the world and usually when Egypt is mentioned there is a warning with it. For example, Isaiah 31 verse 1, which says –

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, And rely on horses, Who trust in chariots because they are many, And in horsemen because they are very strong, But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, Nor seek the Lord!

In a spiritual sense for a Christian, it's when we go back into the world system, adapt to its values, its ethos, it's views and ways of doing things, it's when we depend on the world for something or someone that we play a very dangerous game.

In verse 11 we also see the first complement that a man pays to his wife.

"Indeed, I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance"

Sarah must have been an extremely good-looking woman. Beauty is usually associated only with the young but it's great to see that in the bible the second woman mentioned is associated with beauty regardless of her age. In fact, she was so lovely that Abraham harboured the fear that anyone who would meet her would not just make advances on her but would kill him so as to keep her. Consequently, he told her that if anyone asked about their relationship she should tell them that she was his sister... Half the truth, wasn't it? Was his fear founded? It turns out it was to some degree! When Pharaoh saw her, he wanted her as his wife but God intervened with great plagues and Pharaoh was very annoyed when he found out the truth. You can read all this in Genesis chapter 12.

I wonder if this situation that Sarah found herself in weakened her faith, was it the situation or was it Abraham's breakdown of faith? And while this was the first time, it wasn't the last time, he repeated this offense later on. That's what compromise does, it can weaken

not just our own faith but it can affect those around us. If we walk close to the Lord or are walking not so close to the Lord, it can and does have its effects on ourselves as well as others around us. Abraham's fears took over instead of his faith and the results could have been absolutely disastrous only for God moved into the situation. Often, we find our fears overtaking us instead of our faith overtaking our fears, but praise be to God, he doesn't leave us in our fears or our messes, He is a good father. He delivers us and even disciplines us because he loves us. He wants to teach us the better way.

Abraham and his family had to go back to where they left before Egypt, where the altar had been built in Bethel. Abraham had to go back for restoration with God. It was from this trip in Egypt that Abraham attains Hagar as a servant and later on, his mistress. In Sarah and Abraham's walk of faith, they had their moments of doubt and of disobedience which created big problems, not just then but also down through the generations, even until this day. This tells us that the kind of faith we have, can interact not just with others around us but can change your children, your grandchildren and your grandchildren's children. But not just your faith, how about how you deal with your disappointments, your failures? Do these things draw us nearer to God or drive us further from Him? Eyes looking on see exactly your reactions, good, bad or indifferent.

In Genesis 18 – Abraham had three visitors, the Lord and two angels. We have another first in Scripture found here, which is the first Theophany which is the appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. Let's turn to verse 9 –

*⁹ Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent."
¹⁰ And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.)¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"¹³ And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?'¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."¹⁵ But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"*

Sarah overheard the promise, she laughed expressing doubt, but what was the Lord's response? 'Is there anything too hard for me!' What a God!!

Sarah laughed to herself, only God could have known her reaction, and he demonstrates that he knew her thoughts when she denied it, as He called her out on it. God knows our thoughts, he also knows the reason why we are afraid, or why we doubt. God is able to deal with all of our thought, emotions, motives and even our fears. There is no question too big for him, there is no fear or emotion too big for him, this is why in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 18:

"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.

Jesus knows exactly how we reason and is ready to reason with us, Luke 5 verse 22

But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts?"

God treats us as the crown of his creation and wants to reason with us not just treat us like robots. This is the difference between having a relationship and being programme in a religious system.

Does her reaction surprise you? What would your reaction have been, if you were her? Does it surprise you that along Sarah's journey of faith, she experienced some bumps along the way? Rarely does the bible ever represent heroes of the faith exercising perfect faith. In fact, there are only a handful of people where no unkind things are said, for example Enoch, Joseph and Daniel. These were the exceptions to the rule. There are many others which we will see in this chapter of Hebrews, where we can learn not just from their incredible faith but also from their incredible mistakes.

There were times when Sarah's faith was tested and she didn't pass. Why was that? Was it because she began to think about things, just as we do, 'logically'? We can do this, when we start asking 'but how can God's promises for my life come to pass?' We can look at our situations, our mistakes, our difficulties, what the odds in reality look like, when they are stacked against us, and ask, but Lord how? Sarah laughed, and said but how?

Oz Guinness wrote – ***'If faith does not resolve doubt, then doubt will dissolve faith'***

Doubt can build walls, making it harder for faith to walk on the right path. William Jeff was said to have written the following –

Doubt sees the obstacles, Faith sees the way. Doubt sees the darkest night, Faith sees the day. Doubt dreads to take a step, Faith soars on high. Doubt questions, “Who Believes?”, Faith answers, ‘I’.

We see that in Genesis 18, God gave Sarah a promise and in Genesis 21 God kept His promise to Sarah. When you are reading this, it is only a few chapters in between both events, but in reality, it was years. It wasn't just 1 year later, nor was it 10 years, not even 20 years, it was nearly 25 years later. That is a long time, and I think from a human perspective we can understand Sarah's faith wavering. Remember Sarah was barren, she never had a child and now she was well passed what is considered child-bearing years. But what did the Lord said to her in spite of what we think is normal? In spite of what we think is impossible? The Lord said “Is there anything too difficult for me?”

In the book ‘Women in the bible’, the author Frances Vander Velde said -

‘Twenty-five years after the first theophany, the promised son was born to Sarah. Sarah was now about ninety years old, humanly speaking past the age of bearing children. It was divine grace and power alone that brought the joy, light, and laughter of little Isaac into her life. Faith had triumphed, and there was happiness in the tent of Sarah.’

The fulfilment of God's promise was not determined by Sarah's doubt, stumblings or set back but her faith was key to the promises of God being fulfilled.

25 years is a long time and during this time Sarah told Abraham to go with Hagar so that she could bear him a child. Oh! what a crisis of faith! But even in this, God is still in control which we see in Galatians chapter 4. For as Paul puts it, Sarah is a typology of Grace. Let start to read from verse 21 –

²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— ²⁵ for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— ²⁶ but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ²⁷ For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labour! For the desolate has many more children. Than she who has a husband.”

28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. 29 But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

In these verses we see the two covenants, and the two women, Hagar and Sarah representing them. Hagar was a slave and Ismael her son was born because of human reasoning and lack of faith. While Sarah, was a freewoman and Isaac her son was born because of God's promise. Paul tells us in verse 24, that this story has a deeper meaning, a symbolic meaning. Hagar represents the law, Mt Sinai in Arabi and even the earthly Jerusalem. Sarah represents grace and the new Jerusalem to which we pointed to last week, that this was the city that Abraham was looking forward to, the city where the builder and architect is God himself. They shared this vision.

When we think about this, we know that it's not just the Jews but also gentiles who are wrapped up in religion and with their laws, what they can do, the ceremonies that they are bound too. But real faith, saving faith, true faith is about confidence in God's word. Paul contrasts the two births, but there is also a contrast in the natural and spiritual birth. Jesus told Nicodemus in John chapter 3 verse 6 and 7 –

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Paul pointed out something similar in Romans 9 verses 8 and 9 –

That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. 9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah spent most of her life physically barren but spiritually speaking, we too were spiritually barren until God done a miracle in our lives and we were born of God. In Hebrews 11 verse 11 we see that Sarah received strength but we too received from God, not so much strength but grace to believe God about our sin and stance before Him – Ephesians 2 verses 4 to 13 sums it up beautifully, let's turn there:

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace

you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

¹¹ Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—¹² that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Sarah's crises of faith was when she told Abraham to go for an alternative human way so that the promise of God would be fulfilled but here we also see Abraham's compliance to this idea. Abraham should of said no and encouraged Sarah in her faith, but like any man he willingly complied! It is of vital importance that we encourage one another especially when a person is going through a crises within their life, within their faith. This is why Paul encouraged the Galatians church in Galatians 6 verse 2—

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

Sarah and Abraham's failed, but God's promises never failed. Praise God for that! God is so long-suffering, gracious and merciful. We may fail Him but Jesus never fails us! God doesn't write us off when we fail. Like Sarah and Abraham, their human reasoning have had major consequences which we still experience. Some actions have long lasting results, and you could get down about it, but look at it like this, God still accomplished His will in their lives, and God will still accomplish His will in your life once you lay down your own way and pick up the batten of Faith, trusting Him alone.

For 13 years between the birth of Ismael and Isaac, it seems that Abraham did not receive a word from the Lord. Yes they had to go back to basics, and wait upon the Lord. John Phillips puts it like this:

"The solution was to believe God, something both Abraham and Sarah did, with the eventual result that the impossible happened. For what is impossible with men is not impossible with God."

This gives us great insight into what we can do when we ever face a time of lapse in our faith, or disappointment or even if we are on the edge of going back, when the promise seems too far off, too impossible. We need to go back to basics, even perhaps walk away from our sin and repent, and trust God. Hebrews 11 verse 11 tells us Sarah was old. She was 90 years of age, most people would be happy to be still alive never mind have a baby. This verse, tells us something interesting which we don't really get a sense of in Genesis, which is, that as some point, the light went on in Sarah's heart and mind and she believed God. She must have thought about it, and thought about the one who gave the promise to them, the source of all things. She believed that God could be trusted. Despite her age, by faith Sarah believed the unbelievable, the inconceivable, the physically impossible. Sarah trusted God and at that point in her life, a miracle was required, and nothing short of it. But her impossible faith led to an impossible birth. Regardless of how Sarah's journey of faith began, it ended well. Our journey of faith may have ups and downs like Sarah, but surely her life is an inspiration to content for the faith, and run the race, looking towards the end, to finish well.

In verse 12 we see that the emphasis moves from Sarah's faith back to Abraham. When it says:

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Therefore, in the light of Sarah's faith, believing God, we see the logic of faith opened the way for the miraculous. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born, which is why the writer describes him as good as dead, surely with God nothing is impossible! The Lord used the natural means to bring about His purpose. Our author of Hebrews might well have spoken about Sarah's body, rather than Abraham's, as being as good as dead, as Abraham married again and became the father of more children; but the same expression is used by Paul of Abraham's body in a similar context in Romans chapter 4, verses 19 to 22:

¹⁹ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹ and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. ²² And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Often times, we can feel empty, dead inside, spiritually dry. It doesn't mean that it's over, it means that you are a good candidate for God to do a miracle in your life. Warren Wiersbe wrote –

“Faith gave Abraham and Sarah power to have a child when they were “as good as dead.” Abraham and his pilgrim descendants did not turn back, as the Hebrew leaders were tempted to do, but kept their eyes on God and pressed on to victory”.

Abraham and Sarah had a multitude of descendants, as many as the stars, innumerable as the sand on the seashore. The promise found its fulfilment down through the centuries, right to Christ who is the fulfilment of all the law and the prophets which Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5 verse 17 –

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil.

But the promise was not just physical descendants but also spiritual ones which we see earlier on in Romans chapter 4, in verse 16 to 18, when Paul wrote:

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all ¹⁷ (as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed— God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; ¹⁸ who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”

Jesus made the way, he completely fulfilled the promise for through him and by his grace we are heirs and fellow citizens to that city Abraham and Sarah had their eyes set upon. For the person who comes to Jesus by faith, God promises them a miracle also, of hope and of forgiveness, of regeneration and justification, of sanctification and eventually glorification.

Faith is powerful. Faith sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, touches the intangible, and accomplishes the impossible. Sarah and Abraham's circumstances for God's promises to be fulfilled seemed impossible, while reason argued not possible, remember the Lord said to Sarah “Is there anything too hard for me?” Whatever your circumstance is, God is still the same God of Sarah and Abraham, and in all of history, he hasn't changed. Still, there is nothing too difficult for Him. We need to exercise true faith and believe God, just like Sarah did in the end. *Amen.*