

Introduction

Last week, I started a sermon series from [Hebrews 11](#) that I am calling, “Flawed: Heroes of the Faith.” This five-week sermon series explores the lives and flaws of some of the believers listed in [Hebrews 11](#). Today, we are going to study Sarah, a flawed heroine of the faith.

I have three grandchildren. As every grandparent knows, grandchildren are wonderful. I have often said, “If I had known how wonderful grandchildren are, we would have skipped having children and just had grandchildren!” But, of course, it doesn’t work that way, does it?

One of the blessings for us is that we get to visit with our grandchildren several times a year. We love to see them. And we love to see them grow up. A special time is when we sit down to have a meal together. We put the food on their plates and cut into smaller bite-sized pieces what needs to be cut. When the children were small, they used to eat with their fingers. Then, as they got a little older, they started trying to use the little plastic fork or spoon. Now, I was very happy when they started using utensils because I don’t like a mess. However, the children often decide that it is easier to use their fingers rather than use utensils. Then I get frustrated and say, “Here, let me just do it for you!” And I will pick up the spoon and feed them myself.

Do you sometimes lose patience like that? Perhaps it is a child who is still learning to do things for himself. Or perhaps it is a co-worker who is new to the job and instead of letting her learn the procedures, you say, “I’ll just do it myself.”

Sometimes, we get like that with God. We decide that we will take over and do something because we are impatient with God’s timing.

Today's lesson is about Sarah, who is listed in "The Bible's Hall of Faith" in [Hebrews 11](#). Sarah was Abraham's wife. She was one of the sixteen believers named in "The Bible's Hall of Faith." She is also the first of two women listed, the other woman being Rahab.

As we examine the faith of Sarah, we want to keep in mind that she did not always have strong faith. Like all people, Sarah was a sinner who failed at times. Nevertheless, through ups and downs, she came to a confident faith in the promise of God.

Scripture

Let us read [Hebrews 11:11](#):

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Lesson

[Hebrews 11:11](#) teaches us that what we cannot do in our strength, God can.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Faith Sometimes Falters
2. God Deals Tenderly with Faltering Faith
3. Confident Faith Takes God at His Word

1. Faith Sometimes Falters

As we begin our examination of the faith of Sarah, I want us to see that faith sometimes falters.

To understand what God did in Sarah's life, we need to go back to the beginning.

The first time Sarah is mentioned in the Bible is in [Genesis 11](#). There we learn about a man named Terah who was the father of Abram (who later became known as Abraham), Nahor, and Haran. After Haran was grown and had a son

named Lot, Haran died in the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia. Abram and Nahor got married; Abram to Sarai and Nahor to Milcah.

So, although we know her as Sarah, she was first called Sarai. Interestingly, [Genesis 11:30](#) tells us, “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.”

For some unstated reason, Terah took Abram, Sarai, and Lot and traveled many hundreds of miles from Ur to the land of Canaan. But before he got to Canaan, he settled in a place called Haran. Eventually, Terah died at the age of 205.

[Genesis 12](#) tells us about God’s call to Abram to leave his country and his kindred and travel to the land that the Lord would show Abram. Moreover, God promised that he would make Abram a great nation and that through him all the families on the earth would be blessed.

So Abram went as the Lord promised him. He was seventy-five years old when he and Sarai and Lot departed from Haran. Sarai was ten years younger than Abram, and so she was sixty-five years old.

When Abram got to the land that God had promised to give him, the Lord appeared to Abram again and said, “To your offspring I will give this land” ([Genesis 12:7](#)).

Can you imagine how encouraging this must have been to Abram and Sarai? They were both getting old and they had not had any children. Now God told them that they were going to have a child, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so many offspring that they would possess the entire land. How exciting was that!

But, try as they might, nothing happened. No child was conceived.

Then a famine came and they went down to Egypt. After a problem there with Pharaoh, they returned to Canaan.

Then Lot was captured and rescued by Abram.

For the next ten years, Sarai still did not conceive.

Not being able to conceive a child when one is wanted is a very hard thing for couples. And it was tough even in those days, perhaps more so.

Abram was probably deeply disappointed in Sarai, who was not conceiving and bearing a child.

But, for Sarai, the disappointment was crushing. Bearing children was the most significant thing a woman did. That is how she contributed. That is what she brought to the family. Her children were her worth. Her children were her reputation. Her children were her honor. Her children were her security. Her children were her retirement plan.

If a woman did not have children, there was going to be no one to take care of her after her husband died.

A woman who did not have children was considered almost a disgrace. People would wonder if she was not able to have children because she was not living right. Or she was not able to have children because God was displeased with her.

A woman who did not have children was usually the object of pity.

And her husband would have been very disappointed in her that she was not able to have children.

In that culture of hospitality, when visitors passed by they would talk with each other. There were a series of questions that were commonly asked when meeting a person, such as, “How are you? What is your name?”

Abram would answer, “I am well. My name is Abram.” His name “Abram” meant “Exalted Father.”

So the next question, understandably, was, “How many children do you have?”

To which Abram would have to answer, “Well, none.”

What? No children? How could that be for someone with that name? So, it was very difficult for Abram.

About ten years after God first promised Abram that he was going to be the father of a great nation, God once again met with Abram. He reiterated his promise of an offspring. In fact, God took Abram outdoors at night and asked him to count the stars. Of course, Abram could not do so. God promised him that Abram’s offspring would be as numerous as the stars ([Genesis 15:5](#)). [Genesis 15:6](#) says, “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

So, while Abram's faith was strengthening, Sarai's faith was faltering. They had been trying to have children for decades, and nothing happened. And ten years earlier, God promised them a child and, still, nothing happened.

Here is where Sarai decided to help God out. She decided that she would give her Egyptian servant named Hagar to Abram to have a child with her. In that culture at that time, a slave could serve as a surrogate mother for a barren wife. If a child was born, that baby would not belong to the servant but to the wife. Sarai decided that she could help God by getting a child by her slave, Hagar.

Well, Abram did go in to Hagar and she did conceive and bear a son. But that did not end well. Hagar and her son Ishmael eventually left Abram and Sarai.

Poor Sarai. She could not have a child. God had promised a child and her efforts produced friction and frustration.

Dear friends, a faltering faith never produces a good result. It results in floundering and confusion.

2. God Deals Tenderly with Faltering Faith

But let us notice next that God deals tenderly with faltering faith.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him again.

Once again, the Lord reiterated his promise that he would make Abram the father of a multitude of nations ([Genesis 17:4](#)). He also told Abram that Sarai was going to have a son ([Genesis 17:16](#)).

God also changed his name from Abram, which means "Exalted Father" to Abraham, which means "Father of a Multitude."

And he changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "Princess."

Undoubtedly, Abraham once again told Sarah what God had told him about them having a son.

We are not told what Sarah said or thought. But by now she was almost ninety years old. It was almost twenty-five years since she had first learned about God's promise to give her a child and nothing had happened.

As far as Sarah was concerned, the child that Abraham had with Hagar was the child that stopped the mouths of people talking about her disgrace. But her own heart was still deeply hurt about her lack of having a child.

Not long after this, the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day ([Genesis 18:1](#)). Actually, three men met Abraham.

Abraham extended good old-fashioned ancient hospitality to the men as he greeted them warmly. He urged them to stay and refresh themselves. They accepted his invitation.

Abraham rushed to Sarah and asked her to make cakes for the visitors. Then he ran to the herd of cattle and took a young calf and gave it to one of his servants who was to prepare it for the visitors.

Once everything was prepared, Abraham took it to the visitors. He stood by them under the tree while they ate. Then they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?”

Abraham said, “She is in the tent.” Sarah was out of sight of the visitors but she could not help but hear the conversation.

Then the Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

Just in case we have missed it, the narrator reminds us, “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” ([Genesis 18:11](#)). Sarah was long passed her prime years of being able to conceive and bear a child. She was doubly barren; first, because of some inability to conceive a child, and, second, now because of age.

Moreover, Abraham was also old and no longer doing anything romantic and intimate.

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” Now, this is a very interesting comment.

I have to admit that when I read Sarah asking, “Shall I have pleasure?” I assumed that she meant the pleasure of having a child. And that is how I think most commentators understand what Sarah was saying.

But, as I learned from one commentator, that is not at all what Sarah was saying. In the Hebrew text, Sarah actually says, “After I am worn out and my husband is old, will I now have sexual pleasure?”

Sarah was not referring to the pleasure of having a child but rather to sexual pleasure. Commentator William Lane goes on to explain, “The sharing of physical intimacy had apparently ceased for the couple, and menopause had occurred long ago. The writer... concentrates all attention on the active faith through which they became capable of resuming normal sexual relations, in the course of which Abraham was enabled to become a father” (Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 47B: [Hebrews 9–13](#)).

Now, one could say, “Why didn’t God just enable Sarah to get pregnant by some supernatural means?” She did not know it then but we know that God did that centuries later for Mary, the mother of Jesus. We know that God could miraculously create a new life in Sarah. But he did not. Why?

I think the answer is that God was not as interested in creating a miraculous conception as in rekindling a loveless marriage.

God was enabling Abraham and Sarah to rekindle their love for one another in their marriage. They were about to become intimate again. And through that renewed intimacy God would overcome the obstacles of age and menopause and give new life. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

Getting back to Sarah’s laugh, the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” ([Genesis 18:13-14](#)).

Now I want you to notice very carefully the question, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” You will notice that an alternate reading in your footnote says, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” The Hebrew word means “wonderful” and I am not sure why translators translate it as “difficult.”

The point is that the Lord was saying to Sarah, “Sarah, the reason you are laughing is that having a child would be too wonderful. Is anything too wonderful for me?” No, with God nothing is too wonderful.

One commentator points out that the difference between a Christian and a religious person is “wonder.” Here is how you can tell the difference between a Christian and a religious person.

Ask a religious person who is moral and good and nice and so on, “Are you a Christian?”

The person will say, “Sure, I am a Christian.”

You press on and ask, “Why are you a Christian?”

The person might become a bit irritated with you, but will say something like, “I just decided to be a Christian.” Or, “I was brought up in a Christian home.” Or, “I go to church and give money to the church.” Or something like that.

There is no wonder there at all. No amazement.

Now, ask someone who is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, “Are you a Christian?”

That person will say, “I am not a Christian because I made a decision to become a Christian but rather that Someone made a decision upon me. I am not a Christian because I have tried to live a good life but rather because Someone has lived a perfect life for me. I am not a Christian because I sought the Lord but because the Lord sought me and found me. I am not a Christian because I deserve to be one but only because grace was poured out on me.”

Such a person is filled with wonder that God chose him. Such a person is filled with amazement that God poured out his love upon him.

Do you see that? We even sing about it:

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?

Wonder. There it is. The believer recognizes that there is nothing too wonderful for God.

But Sarah was not quite there yet.

In answering the Lord about her laughter, she denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid.

And here is where we see the tenderness of God in dealing with faltering faith, for he said to Sarah, gently but firmly, “No, but you did laugh” ([Genesis 18:15](#)).

Now, what was wrong with Sarah’s laugh?

You know, there are two kinds of laughter. There is the laughter of *hopelessness*, and there is the laughter of *hope*.

The laughter of hopelessness is when someone says to a stage 4 cancer patient, “If you only eat green vegetables, you will be cured of your cancer.” That person will laugh cynically, knowing that such a diet won’t change anything.

But the laughter of hope is very different. It is like saying to a young child, “Tomorrow we are going to have a picnic on the beach.” That child bursts out in laughter because she is so excited about going to the beach.

Well, Sarah’s laughter was the laughter of hopelessness. As far as she was concerned, there was no way she was ever going to be able to have a child.

The Lord gently confronted Sarah about her laughter of hopelessness. He knew that he was going to change that laughter from hopelessness to hope.

3. Confident Faith Takes God at His Word

And this brings us to our final point, which is that confident faith takes God at his word.

We read in [Genesis 21:1-2, 6-7](#) (NIV84), “Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.... Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’ And she added, ‘Who would have said to

Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’ ”

They named the child “Isaac.” Do you know what “Isaac” means in Hebrew? It means “laughter.”

God had changed the laughter of hopelessness into the laughter of hope. For the rest of her life, every time Sarah used Isaac’s name she was reminding herself of God’s promise to give her the laughter of hope.

So, the writer to the Hebrews says in [Hebrews 11:11](#), “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.”

Last time, I said that faith is simple. By that I meant that God speaks and we obey his word. Sarah literally heard God speak. And she came to the point where she believed the promise. Despite all the obstacles that seemed to make things impossible for her, she believed that God’s promise would be fulfilled in her case, and she confidently took God at his word.

Conclusion

Sarah did have a son. His name was Isaac. Isaac had twins named Esau and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons. And from them did come a multitude of descendants.

But the most important descendant of Sarah was Jesus Christ, her greatest grandson. You see, it is in Jesus that all of the promises of God come true.

Sarah teaches us that what we cannot do in our strength, God can do.

Sarah tried to fulfill God’s promise by having a child through Hagar. But that was not God’s plan. God planned to give barren Sarah a child of her own and to do so when all human hope of having a child was gone. God eventually gave her a child and changed her laughter of hopelessness to laughter of hope. She had come to believe in God and his word.

And is this not a picture of the good news of the gospel?

You try to accomplish salvation by trying to live a good life, by being morally upright, or by going to church. But the harder you try, the less satisfied you are. You have no joy. And you have no hope.

But, when you come to God on his terms, things are different. God says that you must admit that you are a failure and a sinner. You must acknowledge that there is nothing at all that you can do to earn salvation. You must simply ask God to give you what you cannot do for yourself. And when you turn to God, he will grant you faith and repentance and a new life in Jesus.

Now, *that* is good news! Amen.