

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 23 May 2004

No. T0318

Speaker: Mr. Douglas Pettman

Bible Women: Sarah – Faithful in Marriage

My wife and I attended a wedding recently. During the ceremony we followed the proceedings carefully. There was that part of the ceremony necessary for the legal requirements of marriage and then there were further vows entered into by the couple themselves. These were unusually extensive and we learned that the bridegroom and bride had, together, written them for themselves. After hearing them recite their vows, we could not escape the belief that this couple were completely in love with each other and were fully ready to yield each to the other for life. There would be far fewer marriage problems today if the readiness fully to commit to each other was settled by every couple before the wedding.

Our subject today concerns Sarah, the wife of Abraham. The record of her life, as given in the Scriptures, displays her close relationship with Abraham throughout and her readiness to seek what is good for him. We will commence with some background details to help us first get the Scriptural pattern of this woman. Although both Abraham and Sarah had their names changed by God, for the purpose of this message, we will just use their God-given name unless the context requires otherwise.

Sarah's Background.

Sarai, her birth name, means 'princess'. Abraham had the same father, Terah, but not the same mother, Genesis 20:12. From the beginning, the name Sarai indicated some special attraction for this child. During her marriage to Abraham, this couple had a close relationship with the LORD, who changed her name to Sarah. Perhaps to our western thinking there is very little difference. This latter name adds and includes the thought of chieftainness, captain or commander. The root of this word means 'to rule' and this would fit her position and personality. God looked upon her as having this high position among women. First, she was Abraham's wife and thus held a high position in his household. More than this, God said of Sarah, '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', Genesis 17:16. Thus her change of name, by God Himself, indicated the state into which Sarah entered, having received the covenant promise of God. She became the mother of the people of God, of whom Abraham was the father.

Another attribute of Sarah was that she was undoubtedly beautiful. We can imagine how beautiful she was when young and, even as she grew older, Abraham could say of her, 'I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon', Genesis 12:11. Quite clearly she was. On two separate occasions, in Egypt, chapter 12, and in Gerar, chapter 20, she attracted the attention of the ruler of the country and Abraham and Sarah agreed she should call herself sister, to save Abraham from the possibility of being killed. These sad events could well have brought disaster, but God acted to bring them from the authority of these monarchs. Her beauty was still appreciated when she was 90! We cannot condone their action in these two passages, but is it not a happy thing to find that the husband still finds his wife beautiful into old age? Do we view our wives in the same way? Well do we appreciate that love still existed between Abraham and Sarah. Would that it were so more often in our day!

As a matter of interest, rarely do we find the age of women mentioned in the Bible. Sarah is the only woman whose age is specifically mentioned. The daughter of Jairus was 'about twelve', Luke 8:42. Sarah called herself old when she was about 87, Genesis 18:12 and she was 127 when she died, 23:1. Perhaps these details are given to us to show how God kept His promises to both Abraham and Sarah, promises which man could not have anticipated and Sarah could not believe, 18:12. But God is always faithful to His promise. He is over all!

Sarah's Faithfulness.

Sarah obviously was married to Abraham at an early age when both were still in Ur of the Chaldees. It was not until Terah had died, after they had moved to Haran, that God renewed His call to Abraham to go forth and he was then seventy-five. So Sarah had been with Abraham before leaving Ur, was ready to go with the family group to Haran and then, at 65, she still went with Abraham to follow the call of the LORD. It was another 25 years before Isaac was born and a further 37 years until she died. Is it remarkable that we find this woman staying with her husband, being entirely faithful to him over all these years? There is no breath of scandal, only those two occasions when Abraham and Sarah agreed, in their weakness, to deception and to tell a half truth, which was really a lie. We see in Sarah a

woman quite committed to one husband, quite faithful. It is just as remarkable when we see the general conditions around, where both Pharaoh, chapter 12 and Abimelech, chapter 20, took Sarah into their harem. Ever faithful, Sarah stood by her husband. Are conditions different today? We live in an open society where little is secret. How simple and acceptable it seems today to change our life partner for very little reason. For the believer the word of the Lord comes down to us from the apostle Paul, 'And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband...' 1 Corinthians 7:10. Some conditions follow, but here is the Lord's concern for all His people. Sadly there are those today, caught up in divorce, who are innocent parties. God's word encourages you too.

We can also note that these positive things in connection with having one husband. Abraham and Sarah appear to be acting in union, one with the other. Abraham, clearly, took the lead in the circumstances of their life together. But we do not find disagreement as to their pathway. Sarah's part was one of unity with her husband in the general pattern of life. They lived and worked together and, in chapter 18, made a meal together. It is a tremendous joy to see a husband and wife working together today, particularly for the Lord and, for them, a real blessing. This is the pattern set by the Lord in Ephesians 5:31, 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh'. This is the unity that the Lord has planned.

Sarah's Failures

But now, because Scripture does not hide them, we need to look at Her failures. We have already referred to the problems which arose in Egypt and Gerar. Abraham's plan was accepted by Sarah. How much nobler she would have been had she stoutly refused Abraham on the ground of truth and faith in God. Failures are ever present in the lives of each one. How much better if she could have said, like Joseph in similar circumstances, 'How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' Genesis 39:9.

Looking back on her life, Sarah might have justly said that she greatly regretted those attempted deceptions. This could have caused serious consequences both for herself and Abraham but in both cases we find the LORD came in and would not allow the failure. He plagued Pharaoh until the monarch was brought to his senses and He spoke in a dream to the king Abimelech, who readily delivered Sarah out of her situation. My friend, note how the Lord undertakes in spite of ourselves. He may not act in such signal ways now because we have His Word to guide us. Perhaps you are one today who can thank the Lord for His preserving and restraining help in a similar situation. Today, faithfulness is not highly regarded, but the Lord regards it so! Let us remain, firstly, faithful to the Lord and then faithful to one another.

Sarah's role.

Sarah was the wife of Abraham, yet she readily took second place to him. We do not once find her asserting herself over him or his purpose but she undoubtedly supported him in the course he took. In chapter 18 we find three visitors came by the tent door. Abraham did not know these visitors but appeared to sense they were of some importance. He asked Sarah to prepare cakes while he provided water for washing and a tender calf for the meal. Sarah readily showed her support for her husband. She acted at the request of the head of the household and the meal was provided. The apostle, writing to the Hebrews in 13:2, encourages, 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'. So did Abraham and Sarah. Sarah might have wanted to take over the whole plan from her husband. That she did not, indicates her readiness to follow him. The apostle says to the Ephesians, 5:22, 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord'. It is not superiority and inferiority that is indicated but godly order is set out and the example for that order is the Lord. We also realise that there is a happy mean we need to follow. How often we are told today that equality in every sphere should be the norm. But when we come to a believer, devoted to the Lord, we find each one has a place. It is clear from 1 Timothy 5:14 that the younger women who marry should 'guide the house', take responsibility for its running and functioning. The Lord has given each their place.

To add a little more, we find that Sarah calls Abraham, 'my lord', Genesis 18:12, giving him his place as the head of the household. So, in 1 Peter 3:4-6, the apostle speaking here of adornment, says, 'let it be the hidden man of the heart...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: even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord'. In Ephesians 5:33, Paul addresses husbands, 'let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband'. This brings in an essential responsibility for husbands which will reap the godly acknowledgement of the respect and care of the wife. We see the same godly order, giving place to the husband, 'as unto the Lord', that we noticed in verse 22.

Let us keep everything in the balance of the Bible. It is important to note that Paul says, in Ephesians 5:21, 'Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God'. It is not a matter of domination but a readiness to act before the Lord in a way that He has indicated, each having a readiness of submission to the other.

Sarah's faith

Perhaps we wonder if Sarah had faith herself. We have found that she gladly depended on her husband for the daily path. Then we find also some unusual events in Sarah's life which cause concern regarding her faith in God. There was one great lack in the family of which we are speaking today. As Abraham listened to the comfort of God's promise of care, he says, 'What wilt Thou give me seeing I go childless?' Genesis 15:2. God had confirmed His earlier promise to Abraham of a son, verse 4. It is recorded in verse 6 that 'Abraham believed God'. This is faith, the faith of Abraham. Ever conscious of her desire for her husband, Sarah must have often wondered how this would be. Barrenness was looked upon as a sign of divine disfavour. The prospect of ever becoming a mother had died in her heart and yet, in view of God's promise, Abraham's and her own desire for him, she felt something must be done. Sarah spoke to Abraham of her way to help him. Her child would be by her maid Hagar and Abraham could take her for wife, chapter 16. Abraham should have stoutly refused this advice but, sadly, gave way to Sarah's pleas. If only her trust in God had been stronger, Sarah would have realised earlier the sad problems that would arise by this means. What of her argument that she was only seeking to help Abraham and satisfy his longings? Satan was having a field day. The opportunity to spoil the line of God's intentions of the royal seed was great. So it was that Ishmael was born. The world has been plunged into international problems ever since that fateful occasion, as Arabs, descendants of Ishmael, have struggled against Jews, descendants of Isaac. There never was blessing in moral laxity, nor is there really any way of helping God to fulfil His promises. What is necessary is devotion to Him in faith. The result was that difficulties soon asserted themselves with the outcome that Hagar and Ishmael were finally sent away.

God was not about to break His promise. Abraham had already shown faith and now we find in chapter 17 the time has come when God outlines His intentions fully. 'My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee...' 17:21. It is in this chapter, as Abraham hears the promise again, that he laughs, incredulous but so happy. We find the final instructions for the birth of Isaac in chapter 18. Sarah waits in the tent, but hears every word. Knowing that there is no human possibility as she is past the age, the promise that she will become a mother is beyond belief and she laughs 'within herself'. Her faith is not equal to the promise of God. But although it was an inward laugh, the LORD knew! She must be corrected with the question, 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?' verse 14. How would we answer that question? How much do we trust God in what may appear to be impossible conditions?

It is interesting to note that at the time when Abraham and Sarah are to receive their greatest joy, there is also the occasion of God's judgement against Sodom, and the involvement of the family of Lot, to sadden Abraham. The Lord knows how to bring peace to the hearts of those for whom He cares. The coming of the son should fill the hearts of the happy couple with joy. Sometimes the circumstances around us fill us with concern but when we are looking for the coming of the Lord, how different will be our vision! Sarah learned that nothing is too hard for the Lord!

Like many of us, Sarah may have considered her faith as poor, but we also need to ask ourselves how God saw it. In Hebrews 11, we find a long list of pioneers of faith but chapter and only two women are mentioned, Sarah and Rahab. Of Sarah we have the view of God set out by the writer, 'Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and she was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised', verse 11. What tremendous words these are, 'she judged Him faithful who had promised'. This is the commentary of Scripture and God knew that deep down in her heart she was ready to say, I believe God. She shared Abraham's faith and this carried her through. How like ourselves. We may look in the mirror and see a sinner, quite failing to follow through a promise of God to us. We had the opportunity to say something and we did not. It would have been better not to visit some place but we still went. We sensed we failed. But we look in the mirror again, with faith, and see a ring on our finger and sense the Father's kiss, and know the blessing of our Saviour. What a difference faith makes!

We have been thinking today of one woman of the Bible, her joys, her failures and her faith. The lessons of Scripture are just as applicable to every man and woman and it does not matter whether we are old or young. The Lord looks down; He sees and He knows how we progress. May we all go forward, day by day, ever seeking to follow His path for us in dependence on His word, for His glory.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.