

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Supportive Spouses: Sarah

### Introduction to series

Very few of us are important, prominent people. Statistically, there are bound to be a lot more followers than leaders and therefore most of us are in the category of 'supporting cast' rather than headline star! This series of talks is designed to encourage all of us ordinary people to do our supporting job well and see how vitally important it is.

There are a few married couples in the Bible that have equal prominence to each other. Amram and Jochabed (Moses' parents) would be an Old Testament example, and Aquilla and Priscilla are the best example in the New Testament. Neither one is more famous, or obviously gifted, than the other and they are lovely examples of well-balanced marriages. Most Bible couples however, have one partner much more famous than the other. We know a lot more about the Apostle Peter than we do about his wife! The same might be said for the majority of famous Bible characters. In this series we plan to look at four spouses who are much less well known than their husbands, or in one case - wife, but from whom we can learn some valuable lessons.

### Sarah

So, if you have ever felt that your, low profile, life is not of any great significance, or envied the more public position of others, let's see what encouragement we can find by studying the first 'supportive spouse' in our series - Sarah.

Sarah is not exactly an obscure Bible character, but we tend to think of her as the wife of Abraham, or the mother of Isaac, rather than a person in her own right.

Perhaps that already strikes a chord with some of you who find yourself spoken about in the same way! I hope we'll see that both those roles were hugely important and that Sarah, despite her supporting role, is a very important example of the life of faith.

### Leaving home, family and country

*"Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you'",* Genesis 12:1. Sarai is marked out as a follower from the very beginning. The call of God is described as coming to Abram, but Sarai has to leave Ur with him! In so doing she left her secure home, the majority of her family and friends, and the only country she had ever known. She never returned for the rest of her life, which was to be a long one. It is a key part of being married that when one partner moves the other, plus any dependent children, go too. The move might be in response to an obvious call of God, or it might be a changed place of work. Either way, the move needs the support of both and may involve considerable sacrifice. We are not actually told anything about Sarai's emotions or fears about this hugely significant move, just that she went with her husband. But we know from the rest of her story that Sarai was not some kind of stoic, with no emotions or a doormat with no opinion of her own. We are left to conclude that Abram explained the call of God and that she accepted and supported her husband in this first great step on his pathway of faith. In fact, we should note that nearly all Abram's steps of faith involved some dependence on his wife. Without Sarai, he would not have been able to fulfil the role that God had planned for him. Indeed, on more than one occasion, God spells out that His promises must be fulfilled through Sarai's child and in no other way. She is a very vital part of this story.

### Childlessness - Abram's problem and Sarai's problem

But God's promises, wonderful as they were, all depended on Sarai bearing a son and Sarai did not become pregnant. This was a big problem for Abram. I assume he felt compassion for his disappointed wife. I'm sure he felt the fear of not having a son to carry on the family name that all men in his culture and age felt. Much more though, he was hugely frustrated that all of God's promises seemed like mockery without an heir. How can you be the father of nations if you don't have a single child? If we wanted to paint a perfect picture of Sarai as the supportive wife, we could concoct stories of her comforting and reassuring Abram and encouraging him to wait for God's time. But Sarai's childlessness was every bit as big a problem to her as it was to her husband; probably more so. Month after month,

and year after year, no baby came. The cycle from hope to despair went on and on, and must have been harder to bear every time. Doubtless she felt a failure as a wife and, perhaps, some sense of responsibility for preventing God's promises being realised. Abram and Sarai really needed to support each other as the nightmare became more and more prolonged.

### **Scheming that backfires**

*"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, 'See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar and she conceived", Genesis 16:1-4a.*

Finally, Sarai did what we often do when we are tired of waiting for God to act: she came up with a plan of her own! It's never very wise to point a finger too quickly at the failure of Bible characters, especially when we have so many failures of our own! It can also be one of the hardest things to discern whether God wants us to take some action or whether we should wait for Him to act. For some of us, our character weaknesses may mean that we are more likely to use 'waiting for God' as an excuse for our own inaction. Others of us are prone to act first and think (and pray) later! With the benefit of knowing the whole story, we can see that Sarai's plan of presenting her maid as an extra wife to Abram with the idea of any resulting child being counted as Sarai's, was deeply flawed and destined to failure. Let's not be too quick to assume that we would have acted differently in such hugely challenging circumstances. It seems that we all take a long time to learn the lesson that we **don't** know better than God, and He **does not** need us to lend a helping hand every now and then!

Sarai's scheming made matters worse for herself, didn't really help Abram and dragged Hagar into difficulties that were not of her making. Hagar may not have behaved very well in some of the events that followed, but the plan had not been hers, and she couldn't really be blamed for the consequences. It is typical of our schemes that they not only create problems for us, they also drag in innocent bystanders as well.

### **Jealousy**

*"And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes", Genesis 16:4b.* As soon as Hagar became pregnant, Sarai's plan started to unravel. The fact that Hagar conceived so quickly spelled out all too plainly that Sarai was the one who could not have children, not Abram. Hagar felt this made her superior to her mistress and began to despise Sarai. So Sarai, looking for somebody to blame for this deteriorating situation, and unwilling to fix the blame on herself, turned on Abram. *"Then Sarai said to Abram, 'My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me'"* (Genesis 16:5). Before too many husbands nod knowingly and make remarks about how everything is always their fault, let's remember that every one of us is guilty of lashing out at other people when we have been the author of our own problems. The heartbreak of Sarai's childlessness had not reduced at all, and now she had the bitterness of being despised by her own servant and feeling like a useless outsider in her own family. She was failing her husband, her own heart was empty and she felt like God was deliberately holding her back from what she most desperately desired. No wonder she lashed out in anger at the person closest to her.

In her anger, Sarai treated Hagar cruelly, but it is hard to imagine what Sarai felt for the next 13 years as she watched Hagar's son Ishmael grow, and she remained childless and became menopausal, so that child bearing was simply not possible any more.

### **Laughter - bad and good**

Then, when Abram was 99 and Sarai was 90, God repeated His promises: *"Then God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' And Abraham said to God, 'Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!' Then God said, 'No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him'",* Genesis 17:15-19.

Although we know Abraham as the great man of faith, he had clearly lost confidence in God's ability to give him a son by Sarai. His response to God's repeated promise is incredulous laughter! It's hard to blame him when the combined age of the putative parents is 188! Abraham had clearly come to trust in the outcome of Sarai's earlier scheme, and asks for God to give the blessing through Ishmael. God's answer is very short and very direct: No! Sarai (which means

princess) is now renamed to Sarah - meaning mother of nations, and God makes his plan for blessing very explicit, *"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac"*, (Genesis 17:19).

A little later, Abraham and Sarah are visited by God himself and two angels; with all three appearing in human form. *"Then the LORD appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him ... Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' So he said, 'Here in the tent.' 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.) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also?' And the LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?" 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.' But Sarah denied it, saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid. And He said 'No, but you did laugh!"* (Genesis 18:1-2a, 9-15)

God restates His promise in the hearing of Sarah and now it is Sarah's turn to laugh incredulously. When she has finally given up all hope, and finished making her own schemes, God states the method and the time in which He will fulfil His promises to Abraham and Sarah.

Maybe we have had our own experiences where we have given up all hope and then found that nothing is impossible for God. Maybe you're past hope at the moment and wondering if God has forgotten you. I can't guarantee that God will give you what you are longing for, but I can promise that He has not forgotten you, and isn't insensitive to your hurt. God had heard Abraham laugh in his heart previously, and refused his request to transfer the blessing to Ishmael. Now He hears Sarah laugh in the privacy of the tent and challenges her unbelief. I don't think was done to shame her publicly or just to rebuke her for a lack of faith. It brought into the open all her disappointments, heartache and years of quiet pain and insisted that they were **not** bigger than God's promises of blessing, and His ability to fulfil them. There is still to be one more year of waiting, but nine months of that year will be happy anticipation!

Finally the years of waiting were over! *"And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him ... And Sarah said, 'God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.'"* (Genesis 21:1-2, 6) Having initially laughed at the apparent impossibility of what God promised, Sarah now laughs with delight at the fulfilment of His promise, and declares that it is God Himself who has made her laugh. Who would not join in the delighted laughter at such wonderful good news?

### **Insisting on God's best**

Not long after Isaac is born, the animosity with Hagar and her son Ishmael springs up again. *"So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac.' And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called'"*, Genesis 21:8-12.

To us, this may look like simple jealousy and revenge. In fact, Sarah has a clear understanding that God's promises are for Isaac only. God will provide for Ishmael, but he must not be allowed to detract from Isaac's pre-eminent position. Abraham obviously has a deep attachment to his son Ishmael, but God makes clear that Sarah is right to focus on Isaac. Sarah is back to her best as a support, encouraging her husband to do what is right, even when it is difficult and painful. It is worth noticing that Abraham appears to take this lesson to heart and, when in later life he marries Keturah (Genesis 25:1) and has further sons (Genesis 25:2), he sends them away so that they do not detract from the primacy of Isaac (Genesis 25:6).

### **Telling half-truths for her husband**

The Bible never hides from us the failings of even the most illustrious heroes and heroines, so it is no surprise that we have recorded two occasions when Abraham resorts to half-truths to protect himself. The first time is recorded in Genesis 12:10-20. The second event is recorded in Genesis 20:1-18, and occurs in the year between God's promise and Isaac's birth *"Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.' And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah" (Genesis 20:2). When God confronts Abimelech (see Genesis 20:3-7) Abimelech replies, "Did he not say to me, She is my sister"? And she, even herself said, He is my brother"* (Genesis 20:4). It is testimony to God's miraculous 'rejuvenation' of Sarah, that she is still such an attractive women at 90 plus! Sarah is made to promise to collaborate with Abraham's deceptions; indeed it appears that a promise was extracted shortly after they both left Ur,

many years earlier. Previously we have seen Abraham involved in Sarai's scheme with Hagar. Now we see Sarah compromised by Abraham's schemes.

You might say it is the downside of the closeness of the marriage relationship, that the weakness or failure of one partner always hurts the other. Indeed, we should all be very careful that our own behaviour and decisions do not lead other people into moral compromise, especially those closest to us.

### **By faith...**

*"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. Hebrews 11 is a wonderful catalogue of those who have demonstrated exceptional faith over many years. It is lovely to see Sarah given prominence as one of the small number of women mentioned in this list. We all know of Abraham as the father of the faithful, but his wife is also commended for her own faith. She is not as famous as her husband, fought no battles, saw no visions and is not described as *"the friend of God"* (see James 2:23). Nevertheless, she was greatly mourned by her husband at her death (Genesis 23:2), and Abraham purchased the only piece of land in Canaan that he ever possessed in order to bury her (Genesis 23:3-20). Sarah was not without fault, but she demonstrated what the life of faith looks like for a faithful supporter. Her faith did not produce an easy life for Sarah - we have seen that she had deep trials. Nor did her faith prevent her from making serious mistakes, or being led astray by her husband. But it did give her a life worth living and allowed her to leave an example that still shines today.

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes we read our Bibles, and the experiences and characters we encounter can seem a million miles removed from our own lives. The characters are so great, and their actions so spectacular, that we are in danger of being discouraged by how small our lives are in comparison. Sarah's story does not affect us like that. She is a wonderful character, but not in a way that distances us from her. She faced problems and disappointments that most of us can relate to quite easily.

My prayer is that you will find the stories of Sarah, and the other supportive spouses in this series, a help and encouragement to you in your own life of faith. May the Lord use biblical examples of faith to build our faith in Him, and so glorify His Son.

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