

(Devotional #15) **Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40**
Heroes of the Faith: Sarah and the Divine Promises
(Genesis 17:15-19, 21; 21:1; Hebrews 11:11)

BELIEVING THE WORD OF GOD - SARAH

*By faith even Sarah herself received the ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful, who had made the promise – **Hebrews 11:11***

Most of us know the story of Sarah, yet when we think of her, we seldom think of her faith. We know Sarah as the one who “*laughed at God’s promise*”,¹ the one who *schemed with Hagar*,² when God’s plan seemed to be on hold; and she was the one who was so beautiful that Abraham lied about her twice, once in Egypt and another time to Abimelech, saying, “*she is my sister*”³ ... but **FAITH** ... typically we do not think of **FAITH** as Sarah’s strong suit. Yet in Hebrews 11:11, we read: “*By faith, even Sarah herself received the ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered him faithful who had made the promise.*” Because of this, Peter refers to Sarah as ‘*a holy woman who hoped in God*’.⁴

In both Hebrews and 1 Peter, not a single failure on her part is mentioned – only her faith and God’s work on her behalf are cited. This should encourage us, for we too struggle with trusting God, we also ‘*second guess*’ God’s Plan, and as a result, sometimes we too lose hope like Sarah.

Many times, God tests us by contrasting His promises with what seem to be irresolvable facts. When Abraham and Sarah arrived in Canaan, they were confronted with a series of what should have been irresolvable facts:

- Fact: Sarai was barren, and she was 65-years old (*well beyond her child-bearing years*);
- Fact: Abram was 75 years old;
- Fact: It’s going to get worse (*Sarah will be 90 and Abram 99 before the birth of Isaac*);
- Fact: Every time Abraham or Sarah tried to outwit God, they failed dramatically.

Two more inconvenient facts:

- Human schemes always attest to human inability; *and* ...
- When the **FACTS** don’t fit the **PROMISES**, and our faith wanes, we are operating from **HUMAN VIEWPOINT**.

So, these are the facts! Okay – What then is the promise God made to Abraham? The promise is: “*You will bear a son by Sarah*” – **Genesis 17:19**. Do the facts and the promise jive? Not from a human viewpoint, but they pose no problem for the Lord.

Sarah’s story begins in Ur, a center of culture and commerce in Southern Mesopotamia. Ur’s craftsmen rivaled those of Egypt. Many of the citizens were rich and lived in spacious homes. Abraham and Sarah had had a good life, living among relatives and friends. But one day their lives were changed radically. God appeared to Abraham and told him to leave his land and

¹ See Genesis 18:12

² See Genesis 16:2

³ See Genesis 12:10-16 and Genesis 20:1-7 – Actually, Sarah was the half-sister of Abraham by his father, but Sarah had a different mother (Genesis 20:12). In the eyes of God, Abraham’s half-truth was a full-lie.

⁴ See 1 Peter 3:5-6

relatives and go to a country that God would point out later. This command was linked to a promise. Recall, if you will, the Scripture we studied in our last devotional:

- **The LORD** said to Abram⁵, go forth from your country and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show to you; and **I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and so, be a blessing! And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will bind under a curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed** – **Genesis 12:1-3**.

Abraham obeyed, and over-night he and Sarah became semi-nomads instead of citizens of a wealthy city – **Hebrews 11:8**

What must it have been like to be uprooted from the comfortable city life to living in a tent in a desolate, under-developed country? (*Let's consider this question from Sarah's point of view.*)

This was not what Sarah envisioned when she married her husband. Instead of a comfortable life in Ur, Abraham now has his eyes set on 'a future city of great beauty and spiritual stability⁶,' **BUT SARAH IS LIVING IN A TENT**. He also speaks of 'the magnificent promises God made to him about being a great nation, and being blessed with a family,' **BUT SARAH HAS NO CHILDREN**.

Ladies, put yourself in Sarah's sandals; *you are living in Ur, in 'a comfortable home, with a well-manicured lawn, a two-camel garage, a well that never runs dry, and servants to do most of the work' – and one day a conversation ensues:*

HUSBAND: "God spoke to me this morning and we are moving."

WIFE: "God spoke to you? — And we're moving? — Where are we moving?"

HUSBAND: "I don't know; he didn't say, but I'm sure he will tell us when we get there."

WIFE: "Are you sure about this?"

HUSBAND: "Pretty sure."

WIFE: "So when are 'you' (I mean), when are 'we' leaving?"

HUSBAND: "As soon as possible."

WIFE: "What are we bringing with us?"

HUSBAND: "Only the barest of necessities."

WIFE: "How long will we be gone?"

HUSBAND: "I don't know; he didn't say."

WIFE: "How do you expect me to pack if we don't know where we're going or how long we are going to be there?"

HUSBAND: [**DEAD SILENCE — FOLLOWED BY A LONG UNCOMFORTABLE PAUSE**]

WIFE: "We're not coming back, are we?"

HUSBAND: "Probably not!"

[These next questions are for the ladies] –

⁵ The central character around whom this lesson is Abram. Later, his name will be changed to Abraham (Genesis 17:5). For simplicity's sake, he will be referred to as 'Abraham' throughout this and future lessons.

⁶ See Hebrews 11:9-10

DO YOU FEEL SAFE? SECURE? SETTLED? OR DO YOU FEEL UNCERTAIN? HESITANT? MAYBE A LITTLE ANGRY?

Raise your hand if you are Sarah and are a happy camper at this point.

Okay, so you're not too happy, or even certain your husband has not lost his mind – but since for some *inexplicable reason* you love him, and you sort of (*half-way*) believe what he says, you prepare to go.

[Now at this point in the story, there is a twenty-five-year gap ... We don't have time to go into this now but suffice it to say, on the way to Canaan (the Promised Land), you and Abraham and Terah, Abraham's father, stop in Haran and you live there for twenty-five years ... until the death of Terah. Only then does God spur Abraham to set out again for Canaan.]

Your arrival in Canaan gets off to a less-than-stellar start. There is a famine in the land, and yet despite the fact that God has told Abraham, ***"this is the land I am giving to you,"*** Abraham takes you down to Egypt to escape the famine. Once there, on account of your beauty – (*for let's face it – you are a beautiful woman*) – fear overwhelms Abraham, who is certain the Egyptians will kill him in order to kidnap you and make you the wife of the Pharaoh. So, your husband comes up with a scheme! He will tell the Egyptians you are his sister! This way, if Pharaoh decides he wants to make you part of his harem, there will be no need to kill Abraham! What?

Abraham's abject failure aside, what do we know about Sarah so far? We know she is wealthy, we know she is beautiful, and we know she is barren. But what about her faith? If we were to rate her faith, on a scale of 1-10, she might be – at best – a 2 or a 3 at this point. Yet despite *her* apparent weak faith, God has made a promise to Abraham – ***"You will bear a son by Sarah"*** – ***Genesis 17:19.***

Max Lucado, in his book, ***CAST OF CHARACTERS***⁷, states it like this: *"In her golden years God promises her a son. She gets excited. She visits the maternity shop and buys a few dresses. She plans her shower and remodels her tent ... but no son. She eats a few birthday cakes and blows out a lot of candles ... still no son. She goes through a decade of wall calendars ... still no son. ... some 14 years later, when Abraham is pushing a century of years and Sarah is 90 ... God pays them a visit and tells them they had better select a name for their new son. "Abraham and Sarah have the same response: 'LAUGHTER⁸.' They laugh partly because it is too good to happen, and partly because it might. They laugh because they have given up hope and hope born anew is always funny before it is real. They laugh at the lunacy of it all."* – ***"You will bear a son by Sarah"*** – ***Genesis 17:19.*** This promise was met with a combination of disbelief and delight. A mother at 90? That will take a miracle! So, Sarah laughed, but the Lord wasn't laughing or kidding as he responded: ***"Is anything too difficult for the LORD?"*** (***Genesis 18:14***)

Since we know the Word of God is completely reliable – since God always keeps His promises – Sarah could be certain God would do what He said He would do, though Sarah and Abraham were well past the age of childbearing. Romans 4:19 says of Abraham: *"He contemplated his own body, now as good as dead, being about 100-years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb."* So, if God did not miraculously provide a child, there would be no son. And that is exactly what God does.

⁷ *Cast of Characters*, by Max Lucado, Pgs. 193-94.

⁸ The name, 'Isaac,' means 'laughter,' so his name throughout the ages echoes this account of Sarah laughing at the announcement of what God was about to do for her.

Genesis 21:1 is a key verse, for it is to this verse Hebrews 11:11 refers. The text of Genesis says, *“the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.”*

In Genesis 21:1, God is acting in His Yahweh-character as a promise-keeper. Normal Hebrew word order for this verse would place the verb (*took note*) first, followed by the subject (*Yahweh*) followed by the direct object of the verb (*Sarah*). In other words, using normal Hebrew word order, we expect to read, *(verb) “And he visited – (subject) Yahweh – (direct object) Sarah” ... but instead, verse one reads, “and Yahweh visited Sarah.” (This sounds correct in English, but it is not normal Hebrew.)* It is written this way to emphasize the fact that Isaac’s birth was supernatural. God did it. Without divine intervention, Sarah could not have born the promised son.

According to Hebrews 11:11, it is in this promise-keeping God that Sarah placed her faith – *“She considered HIM faithful who had made the promise.”*

Sarah’s decision to believe God related to a very human matter: her pregnancy and the birth of Isaac. She was simply too old to bear a child by any human means ... and she could do nothing about that fact – but she could trust the Promise-keeper. So instead of looking at impossibilities, she placed her trust in God and thus received the miracle-child – for as the Angel of the LORD Himself had said, *“Is anything too difficult for the LORD?”*

I can’t speak for any of you, but this pandemic, and the political rhetoric that accompanies it, is emotionally draining. I am frustrated, perhaps a bit angry at times, and a little rebellious. I understand how Sarah felt as she weighed what seemed to be *‘fading promises’* against an ever-present reality. I suspect you feel the same way. So, we ask: *How do we trust God? How do we do what Sarah did? How do we live by faith? What promises has God made upon which we can rely?* Here is what we know:

- *God is good*
- *God is sovereign*
- *God loves me*
- *Jesus is risen from the dead*
- *My sins are forgiven*
- *This is not my home; I have a heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God. It’s the same city Abraham longed for ... and my citizenship is there.*

Just as Abraham looked for a city whose builder and maker is God, we must set our minds on things that are eternal, the things above ... not on the things of the earth. For as believers, we have died to earthly things and our lives are hidden with Christ in God. And we know from Scripture, when Christ is revealed, we will be revealed with him in glory – *Colossians 3:2-4.*