

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Sarah: trusting in God during a time of testing

‘Rhoda’

THIS ARTICLE will consider the life of Sarah, a faithful woman who was chosen by God to be the “mother of nations” (Gen. 17:16). Through consideration of the life of Sarah (previously called Sarai), this article will draw out practical lessons relevant to our lives today. It is hoped that we will be encouraged and exhorted to improve our lives in the service of God. Scripture rightly teaches, “Examine yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5), “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), and “continue in the faith” (Col. 1:23). It is hoped, then, that this article will help us all to become better prepared for the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised seed, the only begotten of the Father in heaven.

The life of Sarah involved a mix of faithful and weak times. However, it is clear from Hebrews 11 that God viewed her as a faithful woman, for she “judged Him faithful Who had promised” (v. 11), and she, like others, “obtained a good report through faith”, but as yet has “received not the promise” (v. 39). This Divine summary provides us with comfort, as it shows how, if we turn to God, He is able to overlook our transgressions and remember us for good (Neh. 13:31). Scripture was written for our benefit: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4); and it was given so that we can be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:17). It is hoped that the lessons extracted will provoke us unto love and to good works (Heb. 10:24), so that we will glorify our Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16).

“The LORD hath restrained me from bearing”

Sarah’s husband, Abraham, was told by God that “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2) would be made from him. He was promised a “seed” that would come forth out of his “own bowels” (15:4), which would be so great in number that it would be comparable to the innumerable number of stars

in the sky (v. 5). Having been given this promise, Abraham would have joyfully shared the good news with his wife Sarah. It would therefore have been extremely distressing for Sarah when she discovered she was barren (16:1). Hannah was another barren woman, as recorded in 1 Samuel 1:10,11, which says, “she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore”; and she described herself as an afflicted handmaid.

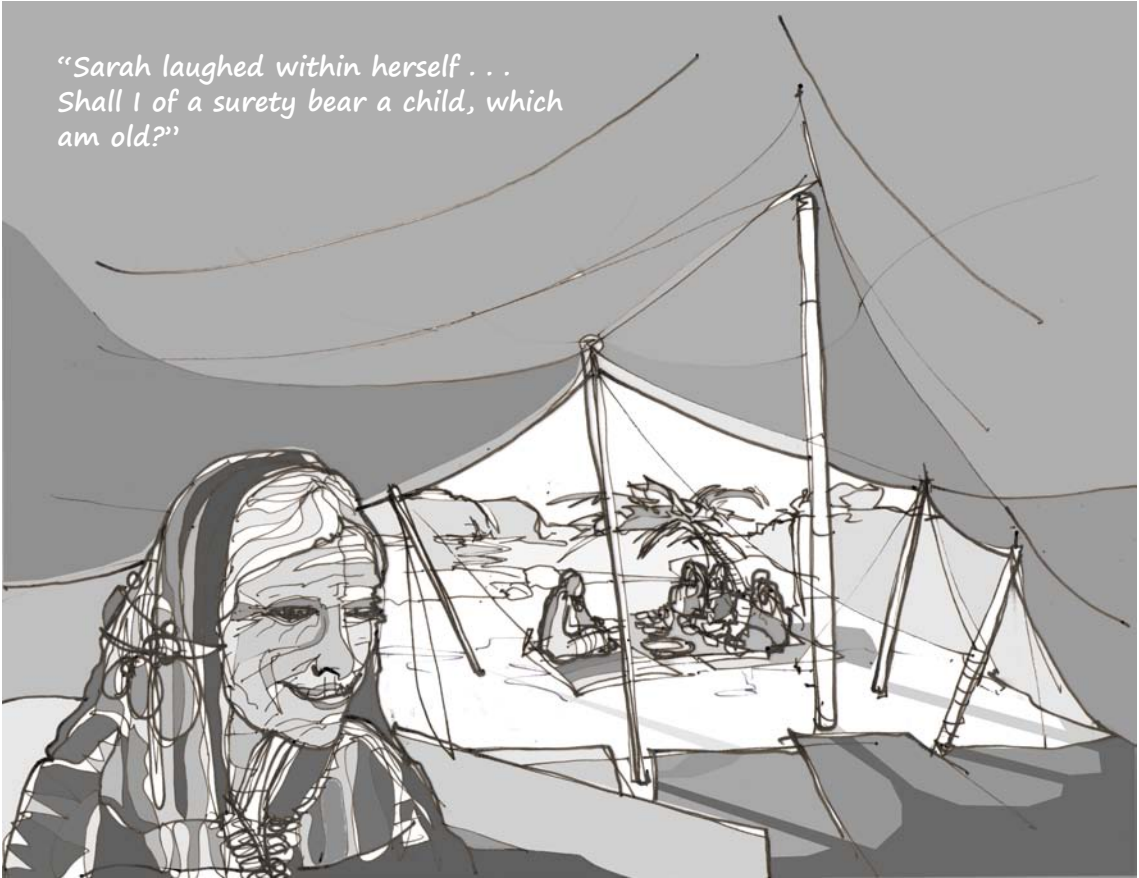
Although Sarah probably felt similar feelings of bitterness and affliction, she did not “cast [her] burden upon the LORD” (Ps. 55:22). Instead, she said to Abraham, “Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her” (Gen. 16:2). This verse shows that Sarah understood the immense power of God. She declared how He had “restrained” (closed up) her womb. Sarah evidently believed that God was in control of her life, including her ability to conceive. Despite this belief, however, she took the situation into her own hands in a desperate attempt to rectify the problem herself. Although she believed that God has the ability to restrain the womb, she was yet to understand that He is equally capable of opening it!

Sarah needed to learn that God was in control of the situation and was able to perform miracles. Remember, when Mary was told that she would have a son, the angel said, “with God nothing shall be impossible” (Lk. 1:37). Hindsight is everything, but clearly Sarah should have prayed to God and trusted in His great power and infinite understanding, for Psalm 147:4,5 says, “He [God] telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by their names. Great is our Lord, and of great power: His understanding is infinite”. Sarah was yet to appreciate fully the great power and infinite understanding of God.

“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”

Sarah suggested that Abraham take her Egyptian handmaiden, so that she might “obtain children

*“Sarah laughed within herself . . .
Shall I of a surety bear a child, which
am old?”*



by her” (Gen. 16:2). In Proverbs 3:5,6 we are exhorted, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths”. Again, in retrospect, we see that Sarah did not allow God to direct her path, but rather leaned on her own understanding.

It is thought that Hagar was likely to have been one of the maidservants gained when Abraham and Sarah “went down into Egypt” (Gen. 12:10,16). This downward direction may have reflected their spiritually low state of mind at the time, which consequently led to Hagar being Sarah’s handmaiden. Clearly, there is a lesson here for us, to ensure that we do not purposely place ourselves amongst the world. Rather, we should separate ourselves from areas of temptation and “Set [our] affection on things above” (Col. 3:2). We need to avoid mixing with the wrong people, as they will bring us down to their low standards. We should rather mix with those who will elevate our minds, improve our standards and encourage us to serve God better.

When Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Sarah said to Abraham, “My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee” (Gen. 16:5). Sarah was “despised” (cursed) by Hagar (whose name means ‘flight’), and she “dealt hardly with her” so that she fled into the desert. We are taught in Galatians 4:21-25 that Hagar was a symbol of the Law under the old covenant, for it says, “Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise”. In this passage, the bondmaid was therefore Hagar, and the freewoman Sarah. It shows how Ishmael was “born after the flesh”, whereas Isaac’s birth “was by promise”.

Sarah’s harsh treatment of Hagar was, therefore, a foreshadowing of how the Law would be replaced by Christ. We read in Hebrews 8:6,7, “But



now hath he [Christ] obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second". Thus Christ came to fulfil the Law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17) and establish the new covenant.

In Genesis 18 the angels of the Lord tell Abraham and Sarah that Sarah will have a son. Genesis describes how both Abraham and Sarah "laugh" at the news (17:17; 18:12). It appears, however, that they laugh for different reasons. Abraham seems to laugh with joy and amazement that his wife should conceive in her old age. Sarah laughs within herself, in apparent disbelief. This disbelief is shown when she denies that she has laughed, because she is "afraid" (v. 15). She may have been afraid when she realised that the angels could read her thoughts. The fact that they ask, "Is any thing too hard for the LORD?" (v. 14), suggests that Sarah struggled to believe the angels' words.

"She judged Him faithful"

The turning point in Sarah's faith was when she recognised the power of God to open and close the womb. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Sarah journeyed to Gerar (Gen. 20). When in Gerar, Abraham pretended that Sarah was his sister because he thought that Abimelech the king would slay him for the beautifully rejuvenated Sarah. As a result of this deception, we read that "the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife" (v. 18).

Sarah must have recognised why God had closed the wombs of the house of Abimelech. She must have understood the lesson that God was teaching her as He was clearly demonstrating His power over the womb. Sarah was shown that God was also able to open the womb again, for when Abraham prayed to God they bare children again. What a powerful message this was for Sarah! It is very encouraging to read on into chapter 21: "And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as He had spoken. For

Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him" (vv. 1,2).

It appears that Sarah's faith was renewed after the events at Abimelech's house. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of this important moment in her life: "Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful Who had promised" (11:11). Abraham, too, had faith that God would provide a son, despite the deadness of Sarah's womb, for we read of him in Romans 4:19, "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb".

"Faith cometh by hearing"

Through studying the life of Sarah, we are encouraged to have faith in God and His promises. Faith in God is absolutely essential to the life of a disciple of Christ, for "without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Heb. 11:6). In order to develop this faith, the Scriptures teach us to read the Word and pray to God. We read that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Sarah would have heard and meditated on the word received by Abraham and earlier children of God. We too must make a dedicated effort to read the Bible regularly so that our faith can be developed. We must allow His Word to be "a lamp unto [our] feet, and a light unto [our] path" (Ps. 119:105). In Romans 12:2 we are told that the reading of Scripture transforms our minds to "prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God". By reading the Word we will be able to discern what the will of God is and be guided in His "path of life" (Ps. 16:11).

"Pray without ceasing"

Through our consideration of the life of Sarah, we have seen that she should have prayed to God in her time of affliction. It is important, therefore, to ensure that we pray to our God when our faith is weakened by trial. Prayer is the way in which we can strengthen our relationship with God and grow in faith. It can help us see the hand of God in our lives, in times of both joy and despair. We are exhorted by David in Psalm 32:6,7 to pray: "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto Thee in a time when Thou mayest be found . . . Thou art my hiding place; Thou shalt preserve

me from trouble; Thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance".

This passage shows how we should seize the opportunity to seek God in prayer while He is to be found. David was a wonderful example of a character who both read God's Word and prayed, for when in affliction he declared, "I know, O LORD, that Thy judgments are right, and that Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me. Let, I pray Thee, Thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to Thy word unto Thy servant. Let Thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live: for Thy law is my delight" (119:75-77). When in affliction, the faithful man David recognised the need to pray to God and to delight and meditate in His Law. Through reading God's Word and "Pray[ing] without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), we too can develop a faith and trust, just like David did.

What He has promised, He is able also to perform

The life of Sarah is certainly fascinating, and provides us with many lessons. We have considered how she learnt to trust in God and allow Him to direct her steps. How might this be applied in our lives? We, like Sarah, can try to take matters into our own hands rather than trusting in God's providential care. We need to be confident and "fully persuaded that, what He ha[s] promised, He [is] able also to perform" (Rom. 4:21). In the Lord's Prayer we read how Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done: "Our Father Which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth" (Lk. 11:2). We need to be humble and accept whatever the will of God is, recognising that His ways are far removed from our own (Isa. 55:8,9), and that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28).

The main lesson from the life of Sarah is to trust in the Lord. We are exhorted in 2 Timothy 3:14,15 to "continue . . . in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus". Let us resolve to produce the fruits of the Spirit so that we may "neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:8). By God's grace, we shall meet Sarah in that great day when all is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, the seed of promise.