

## Sarah And Her Daughters

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The week before Christmas I drove out of town to Jefferson County's old folks home to deliver Christmas presents from my Garden Club. The shabby lobby's worn chrome chairs with cracked green plastic seats was cheered by the good smell of a fresh cut Christmas tree. An old man leaning on a cane brighten when I walked in carrying a big brown box overflowing with packages.

The head nurse's official air intimidated me. In spite of her abruptness she was gracious and received the presents with genuine thanks.

Then she asked, "Would you like to visit some of the patients? Many never have any visitors."

"Yes, I would."

She marched me down the wide halls of the old building to a ward with many beds. Red and green crape paper streamers crisscrossed the high ceiling, but there was no Christmas cheer in the room. My heart ached for the old people who had been through the fires of life. Living had worn them to mere shells. Most were lying in hospital beds with side rails pulled up, or sitting forlornly in wheelchairs.

One old man was introduced to me and I recognized him. He had put a "for sale" ad in the paper inviting gardeners to come dig his plants and flowers when the Interstate forced him to sell his house and gardens. I took my shovel and dug iris before the bull dozers demolished everything.

"They are some of my great treasured flowers, and I think of you with joy every spring. I know you loved them and I appreciated the

opportunity of own them.”

His wrinkled old face crinkled up in a big smile. He laughed and squeezed my hand. Two garden-lovers never tire of talking about flowers. The nurse told me all the plants that didn't sell were moved to a hill opposite the home, and the the hillside is ablaze with color every spring.

Bringing love and laughter to an old man's day put a song in my heart. But the harsh reality of the nursing home gave a shocking new perspective on an old woman in the Bible. Sarah was married to Abraham and gave birth to a baby boy when she was ninety! I drove home determined to find out how it happened. A search of the Scripture revealed the meaning of that special birth.

First off, I wondered how a ninety-year-old could chase a toddler. Most women would kill themselves if they became pregnant after forty. In Bible times a barren woman felt great reproach. Children were considered a blessing from the Lord. The Bible says, “Happy is the man whose quiver is full.” That doesn't mean arrows.

Years before Sarah conceive the Lord promised to make a great nation through Abraham and Sarah. Each month they kept hoping for a baby. They didn't give up at sixty, but in her late seventies Sarah had her doubts.

Why had God not come through when He promised to make them a great nation? Three times God told Abraham they would have a child. Yet birthdays came year after year but no baby. Abraham's faith grew through waiting and trusting God even when His promise wasn't fulfilled.

Between the second and third time God restated the promise, Sarah couldn't even hope it would come true. She was too old to have a baby. Maybe she reasoned that God helps those who help themselves. Anyway, she would do her part to make God's promise come true. She figured the only way she could have children was through her young Egyptian servant girl.

“Since the Lord has given me no children,” Sarah told Abraham,

“you may sleep with my servant girl, and her children shall be mine” (Genesis 16:2 Living Bible).

A slave’s children belonged to the slave owner, so she would claim the baby as her own. This must be the way God would give her children, she reasoned.

Even Abraham thought it was a good idea.

When she tried to help God, her plan brought pain and grief. When Hagar conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. In the best circumstances ridicule is hard to endure. It struck the core of Sarah’s heart when Hagar mocked her for the inadequacy that distressed her most. It was more than she could bear.

“It’s all your fault,” she accused Abraham. “For now this servant girl of mine despises me, though I myself gave her the privilege of being your wife. May the Lord judge you for doing this to me!” (Genesis 16:5 Living Bible).

Poor Abraham, caught between the two women, evaded his responsibility. He told Sarah that Hagar was her slave, and she should put a stop to her insolence.

With a glint of vindictiveness in her eye, Sarah set about to put Hagar back in her place. She “dealt severely with her, humbling and afflicting her.”

A slave had no legal rights. The only way out was death or flight. With a heavy heart and body Hagar ran away. She slipped away under the cover of the hot dark. Walking all the way back home to Egypt, even though she was six months pregnant, was better than enduring Sarah’s wrath.

She had to cross a thick defensive wall, like the Great Wall of China, that was built across the northwestern highway that ran out of Egypt. The wall was called the Shur. Hagar was on the eastern side and had to cross a desert to reach refuge beyond the Shur.

On the road to Shur the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ, found Hagar resting by a spring of water. He asked her where she had come from and where she intended going. Even though she

did not trust in God, she could not lie to Him. She said, “I am running away from my mistress.”

The Lord told her to go back and submit humbly to Sarah. If she did her descendants would be too numerous to count. He gave the name Ishmael to her baby. It means “God hears.” The Lord heard and paid attention to even a poor slave’s trouble.

Three more long, unhappy months went by before Hagar gave birth to a son. The celebration in Abraham’s camp went on for weeks. At eighty six he had become a father.

It is obvious from Scripture that Sarah didn’t accept the baby as her child. When he became a teenager, she sent him and his mother away for good. All her scheming did not help a bit.

There are many reference in the Old and New Testament that mention Sarah. I was struck by this statement: “Sarah obeyed Abraham (she followed his guidance and acknowledged his headship over her by) calling him lord- master, leader, and authority.” (I Peter 3:5 Amplified Bible) That is so far from the attitude of today’s women that “out of sight, man” describes their attitude The Women’s Rights movement would pitch a fit if they were told they must speak to their husband like Sarah did to Abraham. Deep down, women strongly suspect that if they give up their right to be independent, their husbands will take advantage of their submission and demand all sort of impossible things.

I had never expressed my love and respect for my husband, Bill, by calling him lord! It took me a long time to be willing to let him be my leader. That sort of attitude went against all my natural inclinations. I needed supernatural help from God if I was to come anywhere near following Sarah’s example.

Did her obedience to Abraham have anything to do with having a baby at ninety? Another place in the New Testament mentioned Sarah as one of the heroines of the faith. (Hebrews 11:11) Perhaps there was a connection between and old, old lady becoming a mother and her learning to be an obedient wife.

Then I found both were the result of a faith that finally believed God. "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since *she considered Him faithful who had promised.*" (Hebrews 11: 11 )

If "even Sarah" grew in faith till a miracle occurred in her life, perhaps I could be a woman of faith. Life isn't always exciting so maybe I could believe God's promises when daily living can only be described as "humdrum."

Digging deeper, I learned that Sarah was brought up in a family that worshipped idols. Her faith in the living God apparently began when He called Abraham to leave their homeland in Ur of the Chaldees. God told Abraham that He would lead them to a place and give it to their descendants. They would be a special people through whom He would reveal Himself and bless the world.

Imagine what a distressing experience it was for Sarah to leave the dear and familiar things and places a woman treasures. A friend of mine recently told me her husband wants to move to the Gulf Coast and live on the Mobile Bay. He wanted to start life over. She thinks that part of Alabama is about the worst place on earth to live permanently. A weekend at the Grand Hotel is more than all right, but semitropical heat and roaches and mosquitoes and sand and days and nights so humid you could cut the air with a butter knife are not for her. And struggling with a new business in a new town, watching her man suffer and work--well, she doesn't want to go to what she knows awaits them.

Poor Sarah didn't know what awaited her in the new land God called them to. But she loved Abraham and would go anywhere with him.

At God's call she was wrenched from the comforts of a rich and prominent home to go by camel train on a long, long journey. Their route covered thousands of miles. All God said was that He would show them where to go.

Ur, where they lived, was one of the largest cities of that day. It was a cultural, religious, and financial center and had two seaports.

From these ports on the Persian Gulf ships sailed to all parts of the world. Temples dotted the city, and vast libraries held thousands of books.

Sarah left a highly cultured city and live in a tent. Many women enjoy camping trips with their families, but vacationing in a tent is one thing, and living in one for the rest of your life is quite another.

I can empathize with Sarah and Abraham's trust in God to lead them. God also promised He would show me what to do if I gave my life to Him. It happened when I was sixteen. No one sitting near me in church heard His voice. But I did. I had listened to a sermon that planted a longing in my heart to know God. The preacher challenged the people to give their life to the Lord Jesus. I thought that would be a wonderful thing to do, but couldn't imagine how to go about it.

In the quietness of my heart the Lord spoke, telling me to act on the invitation to give my life to Him. I responded that I wouldn't know what to do. He assured me that He would show me. That was all I needed to hear. The preacher standing in the pulpit didn't know the drama happening in the pew. He simply stood there asking the people to raise their hand if we would give our life to the Lord. With the Lord's assurance that He would show me what to do, I gladly obeyed. For me it was as if the resurrection had just happened. I knew Jesus was alive, and here He was in my heart.

God's personal assurance that He would guide me has been bedrock of confidence in the years since that night. He has never failed to give me direction. I have purposed and fulfillment in the knowledge that I am living in the center of His will.

At God's first command Abraham and Sarah packed up and left Ur. The Lord didn't paint them a picture of the new land He wanted them to settle. He revealed enough of Himself for them to know He was worth obeying, and they could trust Him to guide them. In the book of Acts Stephen said the "God of Glory" appeared to Abraham.

The prophet Isaiah gives us an idea of what "God of Glory" means. "...the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, I (God) dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the

contrite and lowly of spirit. In order to revive the spirit of the lowly..."

God is so magnificent and knowable it is worth risking everything for Him. He is the same God I put my trust in centuries after Abraham and Sarah. For the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God is in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). I have been progressively learning to know Him since that night.

Abraham actually saw God. He experienced a theophany, God in a physical form. I did not see God, but through the sermon I heard His voice on a level beyond ears. He gave me a great desire to know Him. Then he spoke audibly but only to me. My friends sitting in the pew beside of me didn't hear Him.

I am convinced the reason He spoke to me was that the preacher didn't explain how a person gives their life to God. I already believed God sent His Son into the world to die for my sins, but I didn't know I must receive Him into my heart as my Savior and Lord. All the time He was standing at my heart's door knocking, and all I had to do was say, "Please come in. Forgive my sins. I want you to be my Savior and Lord."

He has been personally present with me since then. That was His "calling" to me to go to the unknown land of heaven. Like Abraham and Sarah who traveled far before they came to the land that would be their home, I too have to "traveled" through life and I'm confident that I will arrive at my final home in heaven. While here on earth I can know the God of glory better by reading His Word, the Bible. The more I learn to trust and obey Him, the greater my faith.

Sarah's faith caused her to honor her husband as God's appointed head of the family. Her role was not one of subjugation, but one of happiness and well being. God designed marriage this way to bless and protect women.

But what was Sarah's response when she disagreed with Abraham's plans and decision? Twice, to save himself from possible death, he asked her to pretend she was his sister.

With the vision of the God of glory firing their hearts, they

traveled up the Euphrates River to the city of Haran. After living there for five years, they moved on the land of Canaan. For several years all went well. Then famine struck Canaan, so they decided to go to Egypt to find food. Fearing he would be killed when the Egyptians saw his beautiful wife, Abraham asked Sarah to say she was his sister. She was his half-sister. Maybe he felt justified in his lie.

The Egyptians took one look at Sarah and ran to tell the Pharaoh about the new beauty in town. Abraham's worst fear came true. Pharaoh invited Sarah to the palace.

I imagine the situation stretched Sarah's faith and drove her to prayer. She must have talked to the Lord somewhat along these lines: "Lord, look at this mess I am in! See what Abe has asked me to do. I don't think I can stand it if the Pharaoh touches me. You are my only hope. Please get me out of here."

"Pharaoh treated Abraham well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants..." (Genesis 12:16). Abraham piled up riches while poor Sarah languished in the harem, dreading the Pharaoh's call.

Yet God was faithful. "The Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." The Bible doesn't say how Pharaoh figured out the cause of his trouble, but he called Abraham in and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife; why did you say she was your sister so that I took her for my wife? Now here is your wife, take her and go" (Genesis 12:17-18)

Pharaoh commanded his soldiers to give them a royal escort out of Egypt. They had police protection all the way to the border. He wanted to make sure no one harmed them because he feared the power of God might strike him again.

The Lord protected Sarah. She didn't have to buck her husband's authority. She must have developed a confidence in God that gave her a gently and quiet spirit. The Word of God says that is how holy woman of old adorned themselves.

Peace reigned for a while. Then the fires of testing flared up again. Poor Sarah's faith was put to the test again as God continued His purifying work in her life.

Abraham didn't learn his lesson in Egypt. When they settled in Canaan again, he was afraid the local king would take a liking to Sarah, and he would be killed. Unbelievable as it seems, he again asked her to pretend she was his sister. She did and again was taken into the king's house.

God remained faithful to Sarah. He sent plagues upon the king until he gave her back to Abraham.

One test of our faith may not teach us to trust the Lord. I too have to retake them until my character is truly changed. God intends His children learn to obey. He will not allow us to make a big fat zero and expect to skip that hurdle and continue in the school of faith. As far as I can see, there was no failure on Sarah's part. Yet, she grew in faith through these tests.

My husband has never asked me to do what Abraham asked of Sarah. Why, then, should I get upset or angry about a simple request from him? Usually my attitude needs to change more than his "demands." If there is real disagreement, I have found that God answers prayer. God will and does change Bill's mind. More often He changes my attitude in what had seemed an impossible conflict. After submitting myself to God, He often show me Bill was right all along.

After I have presented my side and there is still disagreement, my husband is responsible for making the final choice. God holds the husband accountable for his family. When I realized this awesome obligation Bill has to God, it gave me a deep desire to support him in every possible way.

When I first learned these principles, I failed in attempts to put them into practice. One reasons for failure was my misunderstanding of what submission meant. I thought it meant "Gave in" just as my young children did when I cooked squash for dinner. They had to eat at least one bite. I wanted them to learn to enjoy all foods so they had to eat it or go hungry.

My outward yielding but inward rebelling didn't improve my relationship with Bill or the Lord. But I mentally polished my halo, thinking I was doing great because I knew what the Bible taught about husband-and-wife relationships. I silently condemned Bill for not being as "spiritual" as I. At that time he had not even read what the Bible said about his responsibility in marriage.

You can imagine how my attitude affected our relationship? He felt my disapproval, and of course sensed that I was still fighting him. As far as he was concerned, I was nowhere near Sarah's example of submission.

I didn't realize submission and reverence were attitudes of love and respect, not outward actions. Evidently Sarah had the right attitude toward Abraham. She certainly would have respected him to call him "lord."

Thirteen years after Ishmael's birth the angel of the Lord again visited Abraham. They sat in the shade of a tree talking, and Sarah peeped out from behind the tent flap listening.

The Lord told Abraham that Hagar's son was not to be his heir. Sarah herself would be the mother of the promised heir.

When Sarah heard this she "laughed to herself as she *thought*, 'after I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?'" She had not said this out-loud but the Lord knows what we are thinking. He asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

Can you imagine how frightened Sarah was? The Lord knew what she was *thinking*! She lied and said, "I did not laugh."

The Lord didn't let her get by with that. He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Sarah knew God was Almighty, but until He said "is anything too hard for the Lord?" she really didn't believe she would ever have a baby. Her skepticism turned to faith in the fact that "nothing is too hard for the Lord." She would have a baby!

This promised baby is a demonstration to all mankind that God is the Almighty One who does humanly impossible things. If He could enable an old woman to have a baby, He can give any woman the strength to overcome her natural inclination to be her own boss.

Just as God worked a miracle in Sarah's dead womb, He can revive the cold heart of a wife toward her husband. Love can grow and bloom throughout the years of marriage. Love thrives in the rich soil of faith in God who is love, who is glorious, who is faithful to His promises.

Ninety-one-year-old Sarah named her baby Isaac, which means laughter. She said, "God has made me laugh; all who hear will laugh with me." This time her laugh was not from the ridiculous fact that she was so old but sheer joy. God had proven that when He said He would do a thing, He did it.

God will do exactly as He has promised, and His promises are recorded in the Bible! Mere human impossibilities are no barrier to Him. Had He not said, "I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her?" We must believe the promises and not give up and "help God out."

There was one final test of Abraham and Sarah's faith. God told Abraham to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him. He was now a teen-ager. They remembered God's promise that Isaac was their heir. That calmed any fear that might have choked their faith. Abraham was convinced that if Isaac died, God would raise him from the dead.

Contemplating God's promises strengthened their faith to the point that they gave "glory to God." The burden and struggle of obedience was replaced by a burst of praise. The God of the impossible filled their vision.

The Lord renewed and expanded His promise, so the whole world would be blessed through them. Generations later, when the time was right for God to send His Son, the Savior, He would be born through the ancestral line of Sarah and Abraham.

God did the impossible for Sarah who believed that “nothing is too hard for God.” Her faith places her in God’s hall of fame of His faithful servants. (Hebrews 11)

If my faith is like Sarah’s, if I believe “all things are possible with God” and “nothing is too hard for Him,” then I am her true daughter. I purposed in my heart to pattern my love and respect for my husband after the way she treated Abraham.

God worked the miracle of enabling me to follow her example. Beside the joy of knowing I was obeying God and becoming strong in faith, God bless me with a happy marriage. Bill fell in love with me all over again, for I am more like the “sweet girl” he thought he was marrying, not an opponent who challenged his every decision. Our love and unity builds courage and strength. Together we can face whatever happens in the fires of life.

God will not revive my body at age ninety-one to have more children. But He has done something precious and miraculous. He took my stubborn, pride filled heart and remade it support and follow after my husband.

God can make any woman like Sarah. Ask!