

The Rock: 08-09-2020

Series: By Faith

First reading: Genesis 18:9-15, Genesis 21:1-7

Title: She laughed

Scripture: Hebrews 11:11-12

Theme:

Sarah's faithful obedience in the face of impossible odds, and honest "disbelief", gives us one of the greatest examples of faith as she trusts God's leading.

Introduction:

It is a bizarre story to be sure, when one reads through it. Yet it is a pattern we see throughout the Bible. God stepping into the impossible, and making them possible.

Elizabeth and Zachariah for example. A couple past their age for child-bearing, yet God's promise came to pass because two people trusted and believed.

That was until Zachariah didn't, and for a time he couldn't speak. Yet, even in that, he acted on the belief that God was true even if he struggled to understand how it would come about.

But perhaps we can learn more about that some Christmas time.

The Story:

Because long before Elizabeth, an old woman and past her time, stood Sarah, the faithful mother of the promises of God.

Paul very carefully reminds the Galatian church of her example to all Israel and to all who believe:

"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise."

-Galatians 4:22-23 ESV

Peter emphasizes the importance of Sarah as well as the example for all women to follow, as the mother of all women of faith:

"For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."

-1 Peter 3:5-6 ESV

Now, in this day and age a couple verses like this may very well derail the conversation before we even get to look at it. At the moment we hear "submit", things go sideways.

Most especially for women, who too often have been on the receiving end of wrong attitudes and understanding of what that concept means.

We will explore that in much deeper fashion in our series on marriage. But for now, a quote from John Owen. A puritan, a reformer of all people who lived in the seventeenth century:

"As Abraham was the father of the faithful, or the Church, so she was the mother of it, so as that the distinct mention of her faith was necessary...She was equally concerned in the divine revelation with Abraham, and was as sensible of great difficulties in its accomplishment as Abraham, if not more so."

-Hebrews Volume 7: John Owen Pg. 74-75

He makes that statement because many commentators even to today, wrongly so, attribute the faith spoken of here in these two verses as being Abraham's faith working thorough Sarah.

As though she is just somehow along for the ride.

He states implicitly: "No, this is the faith of a woman dealing with the same challenge as the man, and deals with it accordingly."

Guthrie as well, in his notes emphasizes this point:

"The vital faith of Sarah in bringing about God's promises through Abraham. This was a team effort, not just Abraham. Behind every extraordinary man, is a woman of deep faith, who if we examine their lives very closely-they are not actually "behind" them, but rather standing right next to them -completing them. Making the two, one, and in doing so -together they advance God's promises."

-TOTC Guthrie Pg. 234-235

So, as we look at this wonderful woman of faith, let's remember, she stands alone, together with Abraham as a woman and the Mother of faith made stronger by her partnership with the Father of all the faithful.

But first -She laughed. Why? Let's go back to Genesis again and find out:

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

-Genesis 17:1-2 ESV

Ok, so Abraham's a geezer and God is reminding him of the promise made. Well, the promise was made ten years prior to that and should help us understand why Sarah responded the way she did when her husband was paid a visit by the oak trees of Mamre. The angels asked:

"They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah

shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

-Genesis 18:9-15 ESV

How could she not? Delayed promises, impossible odds, disbelief? You see, the long-game is happening here. But what do delayed promises do to one's heart and hope?

Sarah had watched as Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. She had forced God's hand in that moment by having Abraham sleep with a servant, thinking they determined God's timing and purposes.

God's timing and his purposes for His people and His church are always right. But impatience, frustration, even anger and jealousy cause us in some ways to force His hand in things.

The consequences of stepping outside of His plans can be just a moment on your life, but the results and effects may very well last a lifetime.

As even to today, Isaac and Ishmael are at odds with one another.

What seems impossible to us is never impossible to God. Faith requires our trust "in the process". Not in ourselves.

Take the time to read this whole story (Genesis 15-18) and you'll find it reads like a modern-day soap opera. Ten years pass, no kids. Sleep with my maid-servant.

He should have said no, but he didn't. He sleeps with her, she gets pregnant. Sarah gets mad at Abraham for doing what she asks, he punts the ball and tells her to do what she wants in the situation.

She does! Why? Jealousy! Outside of the promises of God, she becomes mean and abusive. She sends Hagar away, and she meet the Angel of the Lord. He shows mercy to her and gives to her also, a covenant promise:

"The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her,

"Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." So she called the name of the Lord who spoke

to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me."

-Genesis 16:9-13 ESV

You can't make this stuff up. I mean you could, but remember last week -faith rooted in evidence. Just look at the middle east and how both sons are still at odds 4,000 years on.

Hagar goes back and spends 13 more years being a thorn in Sarah's side -all because she did what she was told, after Sarah tried to force the promises of God.

Crazy. These are the people God chose to bring His salvation plan to the world, there is hope for us all, isn't there. Because God oversees and honors our mistakes.

God changes their names and re-clarifies that the promise is to be through Sarah, and no one else. Abe is a super-geezer at this point (99), and Sarah is no spring chicken at 89:

"Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah

your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."

-Genesis 17:17-19 ESV

This is great stuff, isn't it? Even Abraham laughs. It is an impractical thought, so to think for a moment that these folks were some ancient ignorant people who didn't know how the mechanics of nature worked and therefore made up these stories, is laid to rest here.

They knew the odds, even then. You would laugh too! But God reminds them that His covenant promise to them and the world

-and your faith (Sarah's faith) in the promise will bring it to pass.

They now had work to do.

This is why the "therefore" in Hebrews 11:12 is more than just the transition from Sarah to Abraham.

Rather, it is letting us know that because of her faith and action through Abraham (his action as well), were borne many descendants.

This faith journey was a team effort, with two people walking side-by side! BUT

it took the deep abiding faith of Sarah to bring it to pass.

Amazing how God can and does use anybody. Especially those who seem to have little or nothing to offer. Her laughing, mocking actually, turned to a deep abiding faith in that year of waiting.

It had to, as she was bringing Isaac into the world, as the proof of God's faithfulness. What started out as a laugh and a "No way", turned into, "I believe" somewhere along the way.

Leaving for us, an example of spiritual growth and faith which transcends reason and what we "see" with our eyes.

God can and does do the impossible -He is God. Trust and faith in Him and His promises to us, no matter how short, or as in Sarah's case, how long they take to be fulfilled is what causes our growth and spiritual maturity.

"Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

-Hebrews 11:12 ESV

God's promises are always true and fulfilled in His time. This was the

promise which found fulfillment in Jesus, and we are part of that completed promise.

Paul helps us here in his letter to the Ephesian Churches, when he pulls these things forward into the Church story itself:

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

-Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV

We are the fulfillment of that promise, and the belief of Abraham and Sarah. We are a small part of the offspring that are too many to count.

Through Abraham and Sarah -were it not for her faith and belief at 89 years old, do you think a child would have been born?

I leave that with you to think through. You see, the faith journey of Abraham was only as successful as it was because his

great faith was paired together with his wife's deep abiding faith in God.

Application:

Far more often than we men care to admit, it is the women of faith who encourage and navigate men on. Today is not really the day to look at this, as I said, we will look at it more deeply in our marriage series.

But it certainly is a true statement. I would not be anywhere near the man I am, were it not for the deep abiding faith and encouragement of my wife.

Who stands before God, independent and in her own right, and in her own faith. YET, it is together we stand and are stronger than if we were alone.

Sarah was just that woman for Abraham. Again, a man of great faith, an extraordinary man as Guthrie states, always needs a woman of equal or greater faith to support and walk with him.

She was not perfect by any stretch. Her unbelief caused her to laugh. She then lied about it. The angel of the LORD (Jesus), gently rebuked her.

She recovered and began again -that faith walk which hoped and believed that God would do just what he said.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation."

-Hebrews 11:1-2 ESV

All in the face of impossible odds. This is why Sarah is here in this list. Her faith finally helped her believe the unseen. Why?

Because everything God had done so far, that she had seen, drove her to believe even an impossible promise. Why? Because He is God.

We all struggle and stumble along the way, but how we recover and reset defines our spiritual growth. Quite often, we see and know what God is challenging us to do, and it seems laughable, impossible in fact.

But if He calls us to it, He will always bring us through it. We just need to remember, that we must be active agents in that "bringing through".

Abraham had to work at having a child. So did Zechariah and Elizabeth. Only Mary, the mother of Jesus received a different kind of help.

But the father and mother of all the faithful, and the parents of the

forerunner of Jesus needed to step in with faithful obedience and do the next right thing.

We inherit that promise, and along with it the hard work of moving that promise forward.

That is the life of faith. Faith in Jesus and His promises. Faith in the work He has given us to reach the last, the least, and the lost.

Love God, love people, make disciples of Jesus. That is the life of faith, and Sarah was commended and remembered for it.