

Sarah

30th Sermon in the Women of Faith Series

Preached by Phil Kayser at DCC on 2022-03-27

I. Interesting facts about Sarah

There are a lot of interesting factoids about Sarah. At least as far as the limited information the Bible gives us on women's ages, she is the oldest woman in the Bible to give birth to a child, though Elisabeth may have been not that far behind in Luke 1. Sarah was the first woman in the Bible to encourage her husband to have sex with another woman - and you know the sad story of Hagar, and then to be upset with her husband for doing so - and I think that she was rightly upset. She basically said, "Don't listen to me when I tell you to do stupid things or the Lord will judge you." And she was right. Men are leaders and they can't blame their wives if they are cajoled by their wives into doing unbiblical things. The buck stops with the man. And Sarah understood that. She called him the lord of the marriage or the boss. Several authors point out that she is the only non-metaphorical¹ woman mentioned in the Bible as laughing. She had a cynical laugh of unbelief at age 89, and the next year she had a wonderful laugh of faith. She also shows the humorous and funny side to her personality - And John MacArthur draws that out. She was the first Israelite to be buried in Canaan. She is the only woman outside of the Song of Solomon to speak so frankly about the pleasurable side of sex in later life. She is a woman who alternated between faith and lack of faith. Though the Bible holds her up as an example of faith, she also did some pretty weird things that have mystified modern Christians - so much so that I debated whether to even preach on her. I'll be honest with you that I dreaded preparing for this sermon because of some of those mystifying things are really hard to explain. But how can you have a series on women of faith without including the New Testament's primary example of faith? You can't. So I am ending this series with Sarah. And I believe the Lord has given me a breakthrough in understanding her life. And I pray that her life will be a blessing to you as well.

II. Sarah's family background

Before we get into some of the details of Sarah's life, let me give you a bit of her family background. Joshua 24:2 indicates that Abraham and Sarah grew up being thoroughly immersed in the idolatry and the pagan worldview of the Chaldeans. Their thinking was pagan through and through when they first came to salvation. It helps to explain some of the strange things that both Abraham and Sarah did. And the point is that Christians don't *instantly* shake off *all* of the bad ideas from their pagan past or even from their years in government school. Many times Christians don't even recognize that the things they are doing are utterly inconsistent with their Christianity. So, rather than judging Abraham and Sarah harshly for a small handful of grossly unbiblical ideas that they carried over into

¹ Examples of Israel being likened to a woman who laughs are 2 Kings 19:21; Is. 37:22.

their Christian walk, this knowledge of how long they had been non-Christians should help us to be sympathetic and to understand that Christian growth is a process over a lifetime and even over multiple generations. Which one of us can say that we don't keep finding inconsistencies that we need to put off? Even the aged apostle Paul said that he had not attained his goals in sanctification. He was still growing.

Their dad's name was Terah. And yes, Sarah was a half-sister to Abraham. I know, it seems strange. But that was not a sin. As genetics kept deteriorating, God eventually forbade marriage to close relatives at the time of Moses, but Adam's children had no choice but to marry siblings. And genetics weren't a problem back then. But even by the time of Abraham most cultures frowned on siblings getting married. And there are hints that even Abraham and Sarah thought it was a bit strange.

They had two older brothers: Haran and Nahor. Haran was considerably older. Haran was born when Terah was age 70. Abraham was born when Terah was age 130 And Sarai (which is what Sarah's name started off being) was born to a different wife when Terah was age 140. So there were big gaps between these siblings. We are not told why. But this makes Haran sixty years older than Abraham and seventy years older than his sister Sarai. So it appears that Abram's mother died sometime after Abram was born and Sarai was born to Terah's second wife. So they weren't full siblings; they were half siblings.

Jonathan Sarfati's commentary on Genesis sorts through the math on ages and relationships very nicely. Interestingly, Shem, the son of Noah, was still alive during most of their life and Shem actually outlived Sarah by 13 years. This means that the true faith was still available even though many of Noah's descendants had fallen away from the faith, including Sarah's ancestors. To have a survivor of the flood at a time of such great apostasy is a stunning tribute to the truth of the doctrine of total depravity. And the application is this - information alone will never convert a person. It takes God's grace. Sarah's ancestors (and she herself) worshiped other gods despite the fact that they knew God had judged the earth with a worldwide flood within Shem's lifetime. Mankind has always had a short memory-span and rarely learns from history. And the apostle Paul says that Christians should be different - we *must* learn from history so as not to repeat it.

Anyway, at some point their older brother Haran died, leaving three children behind: Milcah, Iscah, and Lot. The next oldest brother, Nahor, married his orphaned niece, Milcah, and Abraham adopted his orphaned nephew, Lot. This appears to be the first occurrence of adoption in the Bible. And it appears that Nahor married Milcah and Abraham married Sarai shortly after adopting Lot - maybe because he knew Lot would need a mom. So Sarai is an instant mother to a somewhat manipulative boy. Though Lot did get converted under their influence (and 2 Peter 2:7 calls him "righteous Lot"), he didn't leave as much of the paganism of his home country behind as Abram and Sarai did. And this frequently happens in adoptions - especially if the demonic has not been broken off. But it helps to explain why Lot followed them around for decades. They were a fairly close family. So Lot was Sarai's nephew, but it appears that she took care of him.

God called Abram out of his idolatry at approximately the age of 48 (though some chronologies make it a bit higher), and since Sarai was ten years younger than Abram, she

left Ur at the approximate age of 38. There is every appearance that she converted shortly after Abram converted. And that seems to be God's normal pattern for conversions. If a child is the first to come to Christ in a family, there is only a 3.5% likelihood that the rest of the family will come to Christ. If the woman is the first one in the family to come to Christ, there is a 17% statistical probability that the whole family will come to Christ. In contrast, if the husband is the first one in the family to come to Christ, there is a 93% probability of wife and children all coming to Christ. This ought to influence the focus of our evangelism. Evangelizing children, while not wrong, is not God's primary focus. Obviously God is not bound by statistics; He can do whatever He wants. But those statistics simply demonstrate what the *Bible itself* says is God's pattern. Even when patriarchalism is disdained, God still works primarily through the patriarch of a family. It's just the way it is. Ultimately you cannot escape from the way God structured life - and He has structured it to function best under biblical and loving patriarchalism.

Commentators point out that their dad, Terah, did not convert. Again, not surprising. While he went out of Ur with Abram and Sarai, he appeared to do so for family and business reasons, and both he and Abram settled down in Haran for a long time - approximately 27 years (on most conservative chronologies). And Abram only left Haran when his dad died. Sadly, Haran was a hotbed of idolatry. Abram and Sarai remained faithful to the Lord, but not Terah.

Anyway, as already mentioned, Sarah converted at age 38. That's a lot of years of baggage from those 38 years of paganism that needed to be undone. Abram and Sarai left most of their old pagan life behind immediately. But other things (such as raising a son from a maid) was not immediately recognized as wrong. It's bizarre, I know. And we will look at that in a bit and see how the New Testament helps us to interpret it. But during all this time Sarai was unable to have children - no doubt a very heavy burden. And since Abram left his older brother behind in order to start his own dynasty, it was doubly devastating to have no children. How can you establish a dynasty without children? And so, in a weak moment, Sarai made an emotional mistake and pushed her husband to make a compromise. But we are getting ahead of the story because that's Genesis 16.

In Genesis 12 Abram and Sarai left the land of Haran for Canaan. Abram was 75 and Sarah was 65 - with still no children in sight. But the Scripture says that at age 65 she was still such a stunning beauty that the Pharaoh of Egypt desired her to be his wife. The Scripture indicates that there was something very remarkable about her beauty. She stood out above other women so much on the beauty scale that Abram worried that the Pharaoh would kill him in order to take his wife. And it's a heads up to you young girls to not covet the beauty of others. Beauty can be a burden and a danger in a pagan culture. Be satisfied with what God has made you to be. But the New Testament will also advise those of you who are stunningly beautiful on how to not let beauty get to your heads. So there are lots of applications to every facet of her life.

Nine years later (in Genesis 15) God entered a covenant with Abram, where God himself passed between the pieces of the slaughtered animals on the altar, signifying that if anyone broke the covenant God was committing *Himself* to die - an astounding statement that was fulfilled in Jesus. And this covenant had a powerful impact upon Sarai.

But a year later, Sarai, longing to see this blessed seed that God had been promising (which shows *some* faith), figures that maybe God needs help. This illustrates that doubt can sometimes accompany faith - something that the Continental Reformed theologians didn't understand very well, but which the Westminster divines had a great pastoral understanding of. Doubt *can* coexist with true faith, and we must constantly cast off doubt. And the Puritans were masters at helping believers to overcome those doubts. Doubts can make for weak faith, but not necessarily a total absence of faith.

Anyway, in Genesis 16 she is 85 years old. She remembers a weird custom from her old culture that if a wife was barren for two years, the wife was obligated to purchase a slave (because in paganism it's *her* fault, right???) and then let her husband raise a son by that slave, and then sell the slave. So the original idea was for the slave to be surrogate mom and then to get rid of the slave. So she asks Abraham to have sex with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. And the results are disastrous. I won't get into that yet, since I am trying to give you the broad contours of the story first. But we see even this kind of compromising in Christians who advocate for the radical two kingdom theology. They mix pagan ideas with Biblical ideas in politics, business, economics, counseling, and in many cultural areas - with disastrous consequences. Their compromises are equally as bad as Sarah's - they just don't recognize it because they are so immersed in their culture with 12 years of pre-college discipleship by pagans and then a bachelor's degree from pagans, and then a masters degree in a pagan university where they have mastered the pagan worldview, and then finally a doctorate in paganism. Is it any wonder that our modern theologians and lay people are so messed up with evolution and every imaginable kind of pagan idea. There is nothing new under the sun. It's no different than what Sarah imported in Genesis 16 from her 38 years of pagan discipleship. It takes a while to undo the years of paganism.

Then we get to Genesis 17 where God renewed His covenant with Abram, and changed his name from Abram (which means "exalted father") to Abraham (which means, "father of a multitude"). Abraham was 99 years old when he got that name change and Sarah was 89 years old. A year later, Isaac was born to a laughing Sarah at age 90 and a joyful father at age 100. Our God is a God of miracles, and Hebrews 11 says that Sarah came to firmly believe that God would do a miracle with her. Hebrews says that she had a very strong faith at that point.

Yet weirdly, later on in that *same* year Abraham went down to Gerar where he once again succumbs to the sin of fear, begging his wife to not admit that she was his wife. And the text goes on to say that it was because he was afraid the king would kill him and take his wife. And she seems to be afraid of the same thing. She is doing this to save his life, because she loves him. But as we will see, it was ungodly to do so.

She is still such a stunning beauty at the age of 90 that his and her fears are fulfilled and king Abimelech took Sarah into his harem. Fear is like faith. In fact, I call it negative faith or the inverse of faith. Both fear and faith demand to be fulfilled. Jesus said, "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matt. 9:29). Inversely, Proverbs 10:24 says, "The fear of the wicked will come upon him." And it's true of believers as well. Job said, "the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me" (Job. 3:25). That's why it is so important that we put off our fears and boldly live by faith.

But how could she have been so beautiful at the age of 90? Commentators point out that God would have had to have reversed the aging process to give birth to Isaac, so she may well have looked much much younger than she was.

But why have I included Sarah in this series on women of faith? After all, she seems to mess up more than a lot of women in the Bible - at least according to some authors. John MacArthur summarizes the sins in her life that *he* sees and that many others *think* that they see. I think it is a bit of an exaggeration. But as a counterpoint, let me quote him. MacArthur says,

Let's be honest: there are times in the biblical account when Sarah comes off as a bit of a shrew. She was the wife of the great patriarch Abraham, so we tend to think of her with a degree of dignity and honor. But reading the biblical account of her life, it is impossible not to notice that she sometimes behaved badly. She could throw fits and tantrums. She knew how to be manipulative. And she was even known to get mean. At one time or another, she exemplified almost every trait associated with the typical caricature of a churlish woman. She could be impatient, temperamental, conniving, cantankerous, cruel, flighty, pouty, jealous, erratic, unreasonable, a whiner, a complainer, or a nag. By no means was she always the perfect model of godly grace and meekness. In fact, there are hints that she may have been something of a pampered beauty; a classic prima donna.²

Now, I personally think that *MacArthur's* portrayal of her is a gross exaggeration. The rest of his chapter is pretty good, but that paragraph was over the top. Yes, she had her moments, but I think they were few and far between. And I have listed out all of those moments for you. We are not going to ignore them. But I want to emphasize that for the most part, we see huge growth in her life. So, before we get to the embarrassing parts, let me prove that God sees her as a great woman of faith.

III. Sarah is portrayed as a model believing woman (Gen. 17:15-16; Is. 51:2; Heb. 11:11; 1 Pet. 3:6)

In fact, Peter portrays Sarah as an *ideal* woman of faith; as a *model* for young women today. We don't have a lot of her story in the Bible, and what we do have often portrays the weaker side of this woman. But let me give you some evidences that she *was indeed* a woman of faith.

In chapter 17 God changed her name from Sarai (which means "my princess") to Sarah, which only means "princess" - the "my" is taken out. Why the change? It seems like such a small change. Why does God take out the "my"? I believe that God was telling Abraham (who also got a name change in that chapter) that he could no longer cling to her as *his* possession and *his* idol. God had a plan for Sarah and Abraham needed to treat her as a stewardship trust. Nations and kings would come out of her. She would not just be *Abraham's* princess, but a real princess of *nations*.

² MacArthur, John F.. Twelve Extraordinary Women (p. 27). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

And Genesis 17:16 shows God blessing a “woman.” God wanted *her* for His special plan. He pursued *her* and prepared *her* for a special plan. And the fact that it took many years before she was *ready* for God’s plan does not lessen the esteem that the Bible has for this woman.

Isaiah 51:2 called believers in Israel to look to Sarah and to imitate her faith. It says, “Look to Abraham your father, *and to Sarah who bore you*; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him.” If they were to look to her, God was obviously presenting her as a model to them. That’s Isaiah 51:2.

Hebrews 11 singles her out as a hero of faith, saying, “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.” She had that faith at age 89. And God blessed that faith. In context it is saying that it wasn’t just Abraham who was a model of faith; Sarah was too.

1 Peter 3:6 urges women to become daughters of Sarah by imitating her confident submission and her confident willingness to call Abraham her lord - both of which evidenced faith in her day-to-day living.

The reason I am starting with these strong affirmations that she was a model woman of faith is that many books are so focused on Sarah’s failures that you would get the impression that she was a failure all her life. I’ll be pointing out a few failures, but they weren’t huge in number. We need to realize that we only have a few snippets of the 127 years of her life. And there was a reason why those snippets were placed there. They were to teach that even the most ideal of women can occasionally fall into sins that they are not proud of. Let’s go through some of those sins.

IV. Sarah’s life had some failings

A. Contrary to Deuteronomy 22:24, she didn’t resist being taken into a king’s harem - twice! (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18)

The most famous sin was fear and deception which led to them risking adultery. They both pretended not to be married to each other in Egypt and later in Gerar because they were fearful of what pagan rulers might do to Abram - Genesis 12 says that she was stunningly beautiful. Abram was worried sick that the king might kill him in order to take her. We rightly fault Abram for his lack of courage and lack of protectiveness for his wife, but I fault Sarah for going along with Abram’s scheme. What on earth was she thinking when she is watching the Pharaoh of Egypt negotiating a dowry with Abram to take her as his wife. Deuteronomy mandates that a woman resist this with all her might and scream if need be. Otherwise *she* bears guilt.

Of course, God spared Sarah by bringing plagues upon Pharaoh. You know the story. But sadly, both Abraham and Sarah do it again in Genesis 20. In chapter 20 she is 90 years old. Let me read that story.

Gen. 20:1 And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. 2 Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Gen. 20:3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Gen. 20:4 But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? 5 Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she, even she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this."

Gen. 20:6 And God said to him in a dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 Now therefore, restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

Gen. 20:8 So Abimelech rose early in the morning, called all his servants, and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were very much afraid. 9 And Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done." 10 Then Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?"

Gen. 20:11 And Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife. 12 But indeed she is truly my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. 13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.' ' ' "

Gen. 20:14 Then Abimelech took sheep, oxen, and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham; and he restored Sarah his wife to him. 15 And Abimelech said, "See, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." 16 Then to Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; indeed this vindicates you before all who are with you and before everybody." Thus she was rebuked.

Gen. 20:17 So Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants. Then they bore children; 18 for the LORD had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Notice that the king faults Sarah. He reproves her for not saying that she was married. This passage shows her fear. And I'm glad that Scripture realistically portrays the strengths *and* the weaknesses of its heroes. In this case, it is a comfort to those of us who occasionally fall into the sin of fear. There are hints that fear did not *characterize* her life, but she feared to do the right thing here. It also shows her failure to resist the sinful orders of her husband - something that many modern women of faith have regretted in themselves. While we can sympathize, we cannot condone women enabling their husband's sins. It also shows her almost committing adultery - a sin so heinous that it deserves the death penalty. The point is, women of faith must keep pressing into God by faith or they too can fall. Yes, Jude says that God is able to keep us from stumbling, but if we let go of our hold of God's hand for even a moment, we too can fall into sin like Sarah did.

B. She wanted Abraham to have a child by her maid, Hagar (Gen. 16:1-4) and then became jealous and angry at Abraham for doing so (Gen. 16:4-5), and then took out her anger on Hagar (Gen. 16:6-7)

Genesis 16 shows another weird side of Sarah. She was so desirous of seeing God's promise of a seed being fulfilled that she comes up with a shortcut. She thinks that maybe God intends to raise a seed through someone else. So she tells her husband, why don't you have sex with my maid and we will treat the child that results as if it was mine. She is no doubt thinking that since she is giving him permission to have this sex, it should be OK. Where in the world did she get this idea? Apparently it was a common feature of the pagan Ancient Near East. Here is an example from one ANE piece of literature. It says,

If within two years she [that is, the wife] does not provide him with offspring, she herself will purchase a slavewoman, and later on, after she [that is, the slavewoman] will have produced a child by him, he may then dispose of her by sale wheresoever he pleases.³

We see similar permissions in Hammurapi's Code, a Nuzi text, and a Neo-Assyrian text.⁴ Pagan's didn't think this was wrong, and it may very well have been a presupposition that she carried over from her pre-Christian days. Her motives were right, but her thinking was not and her actions were not. And by the way, just because your wife might be OK with you watching pornography does not give you men permission to do so. Husbands and wives must both be held captive to the word of God. And we will see shortly how Peter clearly helps us to navigate the messes of Sarah and only encourages us to follow the *faith-filled* actions of Sarah. Let me repeat that. We will shortly see how Peter clearly navigates the messes of Sarah *and only encourages us to follow the faith-filled actions of Sarah.*

³ James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with Supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 543.

⁴ The full text of each is as following:

1. Hammurapi's Code, § 146: "When a seignior [i.e., a free man] married a hierodule [priestess] and she gave a female slave to her husband and she has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves."¹⁴
2. A Nuzi text: "If Gilimninu (the bride) will not bear children, Gilimninu shall take a woman of N/Lullu land (whence the choicest slaves were obtained) as a wife for Shennima (the bridegroom)."¹⁵
3. An Old Assyrian marriage contract: "Laqipum took (in marriage) Hatala, the daughter of Enišrû. In the country Laqipum shall not take (in marriage) another (woman), (but) in the city (of Ashshur) he may take (in marriage) a priestess. If within two years she has not procured offspring for him, only she may buy a maid-servant and even later on, after she procures somehow an infant for him, she may sell her wherever she pleases."¹⁶
4. A Neo-Assyrian text: (41) "If Şubetu does not conceive (and) (42) does not give birth, she may take a maidservant (and) (43) as a substitute in her position she may place (her). (44) She [Şubetu] will (thereby) bring sons into being (and) the sons will be her [Şubetu's] sons. (45) If she loves (the maidservant) she may keep (her). (46) If she hates her she may sell her."¹⁷ As quoted in Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 444.

Just from the story in Genesis alone, we should know that her suggestion about Hagar didn't work out too well. And both Isaiah (54:1) and Paul (Gal. 3-4) use this story to teach us that what we do in our flesh (in other words, what we can do in our own strength apart from God's supernatural) is not pleasing to God. Whatever is not of faith; whatever does not come from above, is wood, hay, and stubble and will be burned up on judgment day. We already saw this principle in last week's exposition of the life of Tabitha - for our good works to be good in God's sight, our labors (including the sewing of Tabitha and the carpentry of Jesus) must be done in faith, to God's glory, by the Spirit Who unites us to Christ. In Galatians 4 Paul says that Abraham's actions with Hagar represents the natural abilities that flow from the fallen Adam and from the old covenant with Adam - a covenant that produces bondage and death. And he admonishes us to not trust the flesh in our service of God. We must depend upon the supernatural in *all* that we do. The point is that Sarah is not just a good role model of what it means to live by faith; she is also a scary bad example of how easy it is for *any* of us to revert to living in the flesh.

Anyway, she suggests a sexual compromise and then hugely regrets it. In fact, she gets angry at Abram for going along with her idea. She tells Abram, "The LORD judge between you and me." And we will make applications of this later. But the point is that even Sarah in that chapter recognized that her suggestion about Hagar was a sinful suggestion.

C. She had a bit of a mean streak (Gen. 16:6-8; 21:8-21)

John MacArthur mentioned that Sarah might have had a bit of a mean streak in her. He gets that from Genesis 16:6-8. Let me read those three verses.

Gen. 16:6 So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please." And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

Gen. 16:7 Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

Later, Sarah kicks her out permanently, and God says to Abraham that it is OK. So was it a meanstreak in chapter 21? The earlier example may have been, but according to God, not the later one. And we will comment a bit more on that from 1 Peter 3 as well.

But you can see the frustration, bitterness, and resentment building in Sarah in those chapters. In other words, heroes of faith are not perfect people. They do let their emotions get the better of them on occasion. In fact, faith more and more recognizes that we will blow it apart from grace and therefore we must cling to Christ in faith every day.

D. Even the passage that Peter appeals to for Sarah's model submission (Gen. 18:12 - 1 Pet. 3:6) is a passage that highlights Sarah's unbelief as she laughs at God's promise (Gen. 18:12-14) and then lies to God about laughing (Gen. 18:15).

But what I found most surprising is that the very passage that Peter appeals to for Sarah being a model of obedience and submission is a passage where she momentarily stumbles

in faith. Let me read the two passages back to back. 1 Peter 3:6 says, "...being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror." There is only one place in the Old Testament where Sarah is recorded as calling Abraham "lord." It is Genesis 18. This is not the earlier situation with the king of Egypt as one hyperpatriarchalist woman tried to make it out to be. Why don't you turn to Genesis 18 because you will see that along with godly behavior there is also some lack of faith. In Genesis 18:5 Abraham offers food to the preincarnate Son of God and perhaps an angel. Verse 6 says,

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes."

That was rather abrupt. But without questioning Abraham she drops everything she is doing and does as Abraham commanded. Abraham then runs and has a servant butcher a calf. Once everything is cooked, he serves the guests. So Sarah is a submissive wife in verse 6 despite Abraham's rudeness. But we will pick up at verse 9.

Gen. 18:9 Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent."

Gen. 18:10 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.) 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. 12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

Gen. 18:13 And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' 14 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."

Gen. 18:15 But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

So even when Sarah was doing the right thing, and even after obeying Abraham, and even after sincerely calling Abraham her lord, she didn't respond in faith. She had endured the pain of bareness for so long that her first instinct was skepticism at God's Word. It's an amazing thing how faith and lack of faith can alternate back and forth in our lives. If it was true of the chief models of our faith (Abraham and Sarah), don't be surprised if we on occasion struggle with that as well. Scripture includes such stories to warn us not to coast. We must constantly be on guard and constantly press into Christ by faith. The moment we coast, we can lose faith. And the results are not good.

V. How Peter helps us to separate the good from the bad in Sarah (1 Peter 3:1-7)

So how do we determine what is good and what is bad in Sarah (and for that matter, in all the Biblical biographies)? We let doctrine guide us. While 1 Corinthians says that Old Testament biographies can be examples to us, we need to read them through the lens of doctrine and Biblical ethics. But in the case of Sarah, there is also an inspired interpretation of her life in 1 Peter 3:1-7.

So please turn to 1 Peter 3 and I will try to show you how Peter helps us to distinguish the good from the bad in Sarah and to *only follow the good*. I have read and listened to some hyper-patriarchal men and women use Sarah as an example of blind obedience to a husband; it's unthinking obedience. For example, I listened to a radio broadcast of one woman, and she said that even if your husband asks you to engage in wife-swapping, you should obey him like Sarah obeyed Abraham with Pharaoh and Abimilech and trust God to protect you. I categorically call that a demonic and false theology. And it has gotten many women into trouble. It completely contradicts Peter's view of *how* Sarah was a model. Peter is helping us to navigate what is good in Sarah that we can imitate and what is bad in Sarah that we must put off. (And I won't give you every detail of how Peter does this. I will just barely give you a broad overview.)

First, the "likewise" in verse 1 compares the submission of the wife to the submissions in the previous chapter, and the previous chapter allowed an apostle Peter and an apostle John to tell civil authorities that they could not forbid what God commanded and could not command what the Bible forbade, and so they were planning to continue to disobey an ungodly edict. True, they resisted the civil government *graciously*, but they resisted; that's the point. Submission is not just passively going along to get along. That word "likewise" shows that Peter is not calling for a blind submission. It is submission in the Lord. And when I point to Sarah's life to illustrate the next points, you will see that she illustrates this point too.

Second, Peter addressed the wives directly, unmediated through the husbands. That is heresy in the minds of some hyper-patriarchalists. Peter is preaching to the wives. He is expecting them to think for themselves. This was illustrated in Genesis when God addressed both Abraham *and* Sarah. This means that wives (like Sarah) are allowed by God to have independent thinking (*if their thinking is Biblical*) - and especially if their husband is asking them to sin. These wives who are being compared to Sarah had completely rejected the pagan worldview of their husbands and instead had embraced the Bible. That does not sound to me like she is treating her husband's voice as the voice of Christ. Yet her independent thinking is still consistent with a radical submission to her husband. And it showcases the supernatural because it means that she submits even when she is smarter than the husband. It's not turning off the mind. It's precisely because her mind is so captured by Christ that she is a testimony that can win him to the Gospel - through godly submission.

And that's the third difference. Her submission did not mean that she could not try to win her husband to a different viewpoint than he currently had. Sarah sinned when she tried to win her husband to a different viewpoint in Genesis 16:2-3 *because her viewpoint she was seeking to win him to was sinful*. And she bore the miserable consequences of doing that. *But* she rightly regretted having done so in the next verses and told Abraham that he shouldn't have listened to her. And he shouldn't have. So Galatians 4 actually agrees with Sarah in that case. He shouldn't have listened to her. Even though we should get input from our wives, we husband's are held accountable for what goes on in the family. The buck stops with us.

But that second speech of Sarah's was a speech that was seeking to win Abraham to her new *righteous* viewpoint. And God later told Abraham that her viewpoint *was* righteous,

and Abraham followed her advice. That's in Genesis 21. God Himself told Abraham, "Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice, for in Isaac your seed shall be called." God said "listen to her voice." Well, there is a similar application in 1 Peter 3:1. Verse 1 says, "that even if some do not obey the word [so these believing wives have obviously been sharing the word - "that even if some do not obey the word"], they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives." Peter wants these wives to "win" their husbands ("win" is the word Peter uses) - to win them to the Gospel that's already been shared - to be sure, without nagging (which tends to be some women's besetting sin), but it is clear that they shared the Gospel; they shared the Scripture. They have obviously told their husbands about the Word of God and the husbands have rejected it. So then they stop speaking about it. They don't nag. Nagging is trusting yourself rather than trusting God. Nagging is an evidence of lack of faith. But you *can* win your husband to a Biblical viewpoint in faith as Sarah did in Genesis 16 and as she did again in Genesis 21.

Fourth, submission does not mean going along with sin. Sarah made that mistake when she went along with Abraham and told two kings that she was just Abraham's sister. But notice that 1 Peter 3:2 commanded these believing wives to maintain chaste conduct. It is not chaste conduct to be going into the king's harem, so Peter disapproves of what Sarah did on those two occasions. And it takes the Holy Spirit's wisdom within these women to navigate such a husband's vacillating desires, and still engage in strong submission.

So don't follow Sarah in Genesis chapters 12, parts of 16, and in chapter 20 by making sexual compromises. *Do* follow Sarah in Genesis 16:15 by rebuking and disagreeing with sexual compromises. *Do* follow Sarah in Genesis 21 by bringing God's Word to bear in your husband's life when he has a hard time doing the right thing. Now, Peter will add that women should do it with a gentle and meek spirit. But God says to men today just as he said to Abraham in Genesis 21, "listen to her voice," whether she says it meekly or not. We men must be humble enough to learn from our wives. When we take the log out of our own eyes first, we might be in a better position to tell our wives that they could have said things a bit more meekly. But we still have a responsibility to listen if their corrections are coming from the Bible.

Fifth, submission does not mean being fearful or timid according to verse 6. Sarah exhibited both fear and biblical courage, it is true. But for the most part Sarah was a strong woman. She was not a woman who was timid. She was not a rollover personality that found it easy to submit. I tend to think that apart from grace she would have found it difficult to submit. When she meekly obeyed Abraham's insensitive and curt command to drop everything and cook a meal for the guests in Genesis 18:6 (without even saying "Please" and without showing any EQ), and when she called him "my lord" within her head (which means his lordship over her was not just a formality; she actually believed it), it was a strong submission in faith. It had nothing to do with personality. She was not servile or fearful in her relationship to Abraham. Peter rightly interprets her submission as a strong submission that confidently flowed from faith and trusted God for the outcome.

And finally, Peter hints that her submission to Abraham did not do away with her equality in Christ. And Paul does the same. Galatians 4 shows Sarah to be equally a representative of the New Covenant as Abraham was. And Peter makes this point of their being "heirs

together of the grace of life” according to verse 7. And again, that makes the submission remarkable. Daughters of Sarah submit even when they know they are equal. For that matter, daughters of Sarah submit to their husbands even when they recognize that they might be superior to their husbands in some ways. Submission is unto the Lord. It has nothing to do with equality or gifts or personality. It’s a product of grace and is received by faith - as everything else in the Christian life is received. So this passage in 1 Peter 3 is a helpful tool for navigating the life of Sarah. There are many other lessons here that I can’t get into. But let me end with three more general lessons from Genesis.

VI. More lessons

First, Sarah followed Abraham out of an affluent and rich culture into a much more arid country with no knowledge of what the future would hold. She left durable buildings with actual walls and storage closets and others comforts to live for years in tents. That’s a huge sacrifice. She followed him out of a familiar and comfortable place and into a strange and dangerous land. That is a tribute to her trust. It was a huge trip by foot - some 350 miles. She seems to have quite willingly left Ur with Abraham in faith. Abraham built a stone altar as soon as he arrived, and God renewed His covenant with Abraham - with an incredible promise that God would die if the covenant was broken. It was such a bold promise that it is no wonder that Sarah’s faith was strong in God as well. Though she eventually wavered in faith over having a child, she never doubted that God was her God. And we can be the same - having solid faith in certain things that God has revealed, and then doubting other things. But she is a fantastic example of letting go of insecurities and stepping out into the unknown in faith.

Second, Sarah appears to have had a good sense of humor and an ability to laugh at her own weaknesses and foibles. I think that is a strong characteristic. I appreciate women who have a good sense of humor and can laugh at themselves. Now, that can go wrong, as it did the first time that she laughed. She found humor in something she should not have found humor in. I recently have been convicted that I need to change my style of humor. There has been at least some my occasions of joking around that I have lately been convicted of that God does not approve. The humor is saying something so obviously false that it is humorous. But our humor should reflect the fact that our God is a God of truth. It was a blindspot in my life. Sarah reminds us that we are always growing in Christ.

But let’s look at both sides of her sense of humor. God renews his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 - once again promising that a child would be born to Sarah. God renews that promise that a son will come through Sarah in chapter 18. And then comes the laugh of doubt in Genesis 18. She just finds that hilarious - that a 90 year old woman (which if she conceives in that year, she would be 90 before the child is born - that a 90 year old woman) is going to have a child. I mean, in one sense you can appreciate that. It’s so incongruous that it seems funny. But we should never laugh at God’s promises as if they are incongruous no matter how impossible they may seem to be. If God promises that you can conquer all of your besetting sins, don’t laugh at that. If God promises that this world will be converted and all kings will serve Jesus, don’t laugh at that seemingly impossible promise. It will happen when Christians start believing such promises and acting by faith. The point is that

some humor manifests unbelief. And God rebukes her. So that was her sense of humor leading her astray. But after God rebukes Sarah, she believes and does not doubt again. According to Hebrews 11:11, Sarah now had a firm faith that she would indeed conceive - and she did. By faith she received strength.

But this God-given faith that she would have a child didn't mean that she lost her sense of humor. Her humor had just become more sanctified. And at the birth of Isaac she laughed a laugh of faith and named her son Isaac, which means "Laughter." And MacArthur thinks (and I believe he is right) that this was a laugh of faith that also involved some humor. Let me read Genesis 21:6-7.

Gen. 21:6 And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me." 7 She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age."

MacArthur comments,

Despite her occasional bursts of temper and struggles with discouragement, Sarah remained an essentially good-humored woman. After those long years of bitter frustration, she could still appreciate the irony and relish the comedy of becoming a mother at such an old age. Her life's ambition was now realized, and the memory of years of bitter disappointment quickly disappeared from view. God had indeed been faithful.⁵

I'll just give you one more application. MacArthur believes that her casting out of the bondswoman was a great act of faith, and the fact that God told Abraham that Sarah was right would seem to vindicate MacArthur's position on that. After Hagar was cast out, Abraham and Sarah returned to a monogamous relationship and it seems that their waning years were full of joy and satisfaction. As they drew closer to God they automatically began to be drawn much more deeply to each other. After Isaac was admitted to communion at age three⁶ and after Hagar and Ishmael were cast out (at Sarah's suggestion and at God's command), they enjoyed a beautiful marriage as it should be enjoyed - one man and one woman devoted to God and through God devoted to enjoying and serving each other.⁷ They

⁵ MacArthur, John F.. *Twelve Extraordinary Women* (p. 47). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

⁶ See my detailed exposition of Abraham's weaning in my book, *Children and Communion: A Presuppositional Analysis of 14 Views* at <https://kayscommentary.com/booklets.md>

⁷ This footnote will briefly discuss the concubines of Abraham. Though Genesis 25 speaks of Abraham's "concubines" (v. 6), one of whom was Keturah (v. 1), I believe that Abraham was monogamous after casting out Hagar. In other words, he married one concubine after Sarah died, and then married another concubine after the first one died. Why would he marry concubine wives rather than making them full-covenant wives? It was because God mandated that Isaac receive the full "inheritance." A covenantal wife always received a portion of the man's inheritance, whereas a concubine got support, but not a portion of the full inheritance. A wife had a written covenant attested to by some authority whereas a concubine had a legally binding contract, but no covenant. Both commitments were treated with great seriousness, but the marriage of concubinage did not have every right that a marriage covenant did (Lev. 19:20 versus Deut. 22:23-27). So Scripture recognized two levels of marriage: contractual concubinage and covenantal marriage. Both were true marriages, but by making his later marriages concubine marriages, Abraham preserved God's mandate for Isaac. Interestingly, this traditional distinction between types of wives has survived in Judaism till today. Rabbi Maurice Lamm comments: "[T]he Sages said that to live with a wife without a *ketubah*, or without specification of fair conditions, is regarded as concubinage—the difference between a wife and a concubine is that a wife has a *ketubah*, and a concubine does not."

had another 33 years of enjoying each other's company together and watching Isaac growing in faith. And I'm sure it was an enormous loss to Abraham when she died at the age of 127 in Genesis 23.

There is a lot more that could be said about her life. For example, though Abraham was tested with the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, it does not appear that Sarah was in on that. She may not have known that the test happened until later. God seems to have spared her that trauma. But her waning years appear to be mature years in the Lord.

And we will end this series by saying, learn from the women of faith. Learn from their mistakes and don't repeat them. That's the message of 1 Corinthians 10. And learn from their lives of faith and through their lives be encouraged to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God. That's the message of Hebrews 11. May we all seek to be men and women of faith. Amen.