

Sarah: Faith Waiting

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling this morning, if we could turn to the letter to the Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 11.

As I said, I'd like to resume this study of this chapter of faith, Hebrews chapter 11, and we're looking at verses 11 and 12.

Hebrews 11 at verse 11. It says, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

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.

Now, as we come to the end of the summer holidays, and with the schools resuming on Thursday for the teachers, it's tomorrow morning. I don't think they wanted to be reminded.

[1 : 12] But anyway, I'm sure the children, they're dreading all the early starts, the long days in a hot classroom, and all the homework. But on the other hand, there are parents, like myself, who are breathing a sigh of relief with the thought of the children going back to school and back to routine.

And it's been a long summer, and of course, it's been great to have the kids off and playing with them and seeing them playing with all their friends. But you know, it's always good to get back to a little bit of normality.

But you know, there's one thing for sure. It's a privilege to have children. And it's a privilege to see them grow up. Because when I come to this woman mentioned here in Hebrews chapter 11, I'm reminded of a different reality for many people, that for one reason or another, they can't have children or they've lost a child.

Because for Sarah, she's introduced to us in the book of Genesis as a woman who can't have children. And I realize that in one sense, this is a very sensitive issue. But what the story of Sarah's life is seeking to present to us, it's presenting to us the beautiful reality of God's faithfulness to his promises.

Because the story of Sarah's life, it isn't meant to give couples false hope about having children. The story of Sarah's life is to remind us about who our hope is placed in.

[2 : 41] Because what Sarah learned was that she needed to have faith in the Lord, who is always faithful to his promises. But you know, Sarah learned this lesson the long way.

It took 25 years to learn this lesson. Because when we consider Sarah in this list of people of faith in Hebrews 11, we see faith waiting.

Faith waiting. And as we've said in the past, Hebrews 11, it's all about answering this question. What does it mean to have faith in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to have faith in Jesus Christ?

And this question, it's being asked because the letter to the Hebrews, it was written to people. Yes, they believed in God, but they were steeped in tradition. They were religious.

They attended religious gatherings. They knew their Bible. But the problem was they didn't have saving faith in Jesus Christ. And this letter was written to the Hebrews to remind them that belief in the existence of God and holding on to tradition and attending religious gatherings and knowing your Bible, we're told that none of these things will get you into heaven.

[3 : 54] Because as Hebrews reminds us, there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved other than the name of Jesus Christ. And so the emphasis of this letter is that you must have faith in Jesus Christ.

You must commit your life to Jesus Christ. And you know, 2,000 years on, that message is still being proclaimed to people in a similar situation.

Because here we are. Here we are again this morning. And there are many of you here, you believe in God, but you're steeped in tradition. You know your Bible.

You look religious. But you still don't have saving faith in Jesus Christ. You're still not saved. And you know, there's one phrase, when you read through the letter to the Hebrews, there's one phrase that is repeated throughout this letter.

It's the phrase, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Today, if you hear his voice.

[4 : 59] And so as we come to consider Sarah, we see faith waiting. Sarah was waiting upon the Lord's promise by faith. And there are three things that I'd just like us to draw out from these verses and see about Sarah.

Because we see Sarah doubting. We see Sarah depending. And we see Sarah discovering. So Sarah doubting. Sarah depending.

And Sarah discovering. So Sarah doubting. Look at verse 11 again. It says, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Now when we read this verse, there's no mention of doubt in Sarah's faith. It all seems quite positive. But when we read the narrative of Sarah's life from the book of Genesis, we see that Sarah's faith, it was riddled with doubt.

In fact, her husband Abraham, his faith was also full of doubts. And the reason they both doubted was because it seemed impossible for Sarah to give birth to a son.

[6 : 09] And that's how the narrative of Genesis introduces us to Sarah. It says in Genesis 11, Sarah was barren. She had no child. And you know, when you consider how the narrative of Genesis then develops through all the chapters, you see that there's this strain that's going on.

Because on the one hand, there's this promise. The promise that through the seed of Abraham, the Lord is going to bless all the nations of the earth. But then on the other hand, there's this problem.

Sarah was barren. She had no child. And as the narrative of Genesis, as it develops through these chapters, the problem seems to get bigger. And the promise seems to be overshadowed.

And so when we consider the life of Sarah, we see these two things. We see the problem and the promise. Genesis 11 introduces us to Sarah.

Sarah was barren. She has no child. There's the problem. But then in the next chapter, Genesis 12, we have the promise. The Lord says to Abraham, I will make you a great nation.

[7 : 15] I will bless you and make your name great. You shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. I will curse him who curses you. And then he says, and in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

But then just the next verse after that in Genesis 12, we're reminded of another problem. We're told that Abraham is 75 years old. Abraham wasn't in the prime of his life when this promise was given.

And what's worse, Sarah is only 10 years younger than Abraham. Sarah is 65. She's an aging woman. And I know I have to be careful with what I say here.

But Sarah, as Hebrews 11 tells us, she says that she was past the age of conceiving a child. And so Sarah, this problem that she has, she's barren and she's too old to have children.

And yet the Lord has spoken. The Lord has promised. There will be a son. But Sarah and Abraham, they're doubting. And they're doubting because even if we fast forward 10 years, we go along the, through the chapters to chapter 16.

[8 : 26] Abraham is now 85. Sarah is 75. Sarah is still barren. The problem is still progressing. And there's still no sign of this promised child. And so what does Sarah do? Sarah does what most of us would do when we're doubting God's promises.

Sarah takes things into her own hands. And Sarah seeks to fulfill God's promise her own way. But whenever we do that, the problem doesn't get smaller.

It gets bigger. And the problem gets bigger because Sarah instructs Abraham to father a child through their maid, Hagar. And so you go on a year later.

Everyone is a year older. The maid, Hagar, she's given birth to this son called Ishmael. But Ishmael, he's not the promised son. And Ishmael, he's there and he's now creating more problems.

Because with every case of polygamy, it causes tension and rivalry. There's jealousy. As both Sarah and Hagar, they're seeking the attention of Abraham.

[9 : 29] And all these escalating problems, they all continue. They rumble on for, as you read through the narrative, they rumble on for another 13 years. You fast forward into Genesis 17.

Abraham is now 99 years old. Sarah is 89. Ishmael is now a teenager. He's 13. And as you'd expect, this three-way relationship between Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, it's now volatile.

And so what we have to see is that the problem is getting bigger and bigger all the time. And yet it's been overshadowed by this 24-year-old promise. And it's been overshadowed because when the Lord reaffirms his 24-year-old promise to Abraham, Abraham just laughs at the Lord.

He just laughs at him. We read that in Genesis 17. The Lord said to Abraham, I will bless Sarah and give you a son by her. Then I will bless her.

She shall be a mother of nations. Kings of people shall come from her. Abraham responds by falling on the ground, rolling over and laughing, and saying to the Lord in his heart, shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old?

[10 : 40] And shall Sarah, who's 90, will she bear a child? And then Abraham, he flippantly and foolishly says to the Lord, oh, that Ishmael might live before you.

Abraham was so doubtful of the Lord's promise that he falls into the same trap as Sarah and says, just use Ishmael as your child of promise. It's never going to happen for Sarah.

But the Lord says, no. Sarah, your wife, shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. And what's remarkable with this is that this promise, it's reaffirmed to Sarah in the next chapter, Genesis 18.

We read that. These three unexpected guests, they all arrive at Abraham's house. One of them is the Lord. And while Abraham is entertaining, Sarah is in the kitchen, and Sarah hears the Lord saying to Abraham, Sarah, your wife, she will have a son.

And Sarah responds in the same way as Abraham. She just laughs. But the Lord knew that Sarah laughed. And the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? And the Lord says, is anything too hard for the Lord?

[11 : 53] And then, after so many seemingly insurmountable problems, and waiting for this 25-year promise to be fulfilled, we then went on to read in Genesis 21.

Abraham is 100, Sarah is 90. And yet we're told that the Lord visited Sarah as he had said. And the Lord did for Sarah as he had spoken.

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age. And Abraham called the name of his son Isaac. And you know, when we consider the narrative of Sarah's life in Genesis, and we see how it develops through the chapters, with the strain going on between the problem and the promise.

You know, when you read it, it's a beautiful narrative. Because the narrative of Sarah's life, it's reminding us that far too often we lose sight of God's promises, because we're always focusing upon our problems.

That's what it's teaching us. Far too often we lose sight of God's promises because we're focusing upon our own problems. But the lesson of the narrative is not to doubt God's promises, but to trust them and lean upon them and look to them.

[13 : 11] Because as Hebrews tells us, that's what faith is. That's what faith is. Faith focuses upon God's promises, not our problems.

And for you, my friend, you might have doubts about yourself. You might have doubts about your salvation. You might have problems in your home or in your family. You might have sins that you think are just insurmountable and unforgivable.

But when you focus upon God's promises instead of your own problems, what you will discover is what Sarah discovered. That is there anything too hard for the Lord?

My friend, there is nothing in your life and my life that the Lord can't deal with and help you through. We just need to take our eyes off our problems and focus upon the promises of God's word.

And you know, when Sarah learned to do that, when Sarah took her eye off the problem and looked to the Lord and his promise, Sarah learned something precious.

[14 : 21] Sarah learned dependence upon the Lord. And that's what I'd like us to consider secondly. Sarah depending. So we see Sarah doubting, then we see Sarah depending.

Sarah depending. It says in verse 11, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she realized that the Lord was faithful to his promise. We're told here in verse 11, Sarah considered him faithful who had promised.

After 25 years of waiting upon a promise and all the problems that she had made for herself, Sarah considered the Lord to be faithful to his promise.

And you know, Sarah, she must have been amazed to hold her firstborn son, Isaac. In fact, as we read, Genesis tells us that when Sarah heard that she was going to have a son at the age of 90, she laughed.

[15 : 26] But then when Sarah held her son at the age of 90, we're told she laughed again. And that's what the name Isaac means. He laughs.

Sarah laughed, first of all in disbelief, but then she laughed in amazement. Amazement at what the Lord had done and what the Lord was, that the Lord was faithful to his promise.

But you know, if there was ever a statement that must have echoed through Sarah's mind as she held her baby in her arms, it must have been the statement, is anything too hard for the Lord?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Because what Sarah learned and what we all need to learn is that far too often we put boundaries on God.

We put God in our little box and we give him restrictions and limitations and we confine God to the God of our imagination. And we think that God's promises that are given to us in the Word, they will never match up to our great problems.

[16 : 34] But you know, Sarah's experience ought to teach us. What it ought to teach us and what it taught her is that, is anything too hard for the Lord? Because my friend, the truth is, the Lord is able to overcome all our obstacles and all our worries and all our doubts and all our concerns and all our circumstances because nothing is too hard for the Lord.

And you know, when it comes to salvation, when it comes to saving faith, nothing is too hard for the Lord. You know, we put boundaries and restrictions and limitations on God's promise of salvation, salvation.

But nothing is too hard for him. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. As many of you know, I was away in the Lake District over the summer.

I was at the Keswick Convention. It's a Christian convention that has been held in Keswick, the town of Keswick, for over 140 years and it runs for three weeks during the summer.

And this year, there was this Australian preacher from Sydney. He was called David Cook. And on one occasion, David Cook, he was speaking about the fact that we put limitations on God, just what we're talking about.

[17 : 48] And from his own experience, David Cook told about how he went into a coffee shop in the rough area of Sydney and he went just there to meet another minister and have a coffee with him.

And while he was there, there was three people that came in and they sat on another table. There was two men and one woman. And these people, they were well built, he said. They had long hair.

They all had long hair. They had lots of tattoos, lots of earrings, nose rings. You can sort of imagine what they looked like. But after David Cook and his friend had finished their coffee, David Cook, he walked past them just to go and pay at the till.

As he walked past them, one of the big, well-built men said to him, are you that preacher, David Cook? And he said, terrified, because they were so well built, he said to them, yes.

And with that, the man asked him, sit down beside me. So he obeyed. Without hesitation, he just sat down. And with these three rough and tough-looking people, they proceeded to ask David Cook to help them with a question that they had while they were studying J.I. Packer's book, Knowing God.

[19 : 04] And you know, for David Cook, it was a stark reminder of what Sarah learned and what we all need to learn, that we put restrictions on God. We put boundaries and limitations on God's promise of salvation.

We put God in a box. But, the passage reminds us, is anything too hard for the Lord? And for you, my unconverted friend, you might think that you can't be saved.

You might think that you can't be a Christian. You're too sinful. You're just not good enough. You don't get it. But you know, is anything too hard for the Lord?

And are you saying that the Lord is not able to save you if you ask Him and if you seek Him with all your heart? Because that's His promise. That's the promise of His Word. His promise is, as it's written on your intimations, when you seek Me, you will find Me.

When you seek Me with all your heart. When you seek Me, you will find Me. When you seek Me with all your heart. And if that's God's promise of salvation, then your problem of sin, that's not too hard for the Lord to deal with.

[20 : 18] My friend, trust the Lord's promise. And you'll see that nothing is too hard for the Lord. Because the promise is, when you seek Me, you will find Me.

When you seek Me with all your heart. But you know, when we consider the narrative of Sarah's life, and you know, it's a wonderful narrative. You can read it this afternoon.

You know what Sarah learned? She learned the most valuable lesson of faith. Because Sarah learned not to look to herself for help, but to depend upon the Lord.

But Sarah didn't learn that overnight. It took 25 years. And a lot of mistakes along the way. But Sarah learned the lesson of dependence by having to wait upon the Lord.

And of course, waiting upon the Lord, it isn't easy. The truth is, we all want the Lord to do things according to our timetable. We want the Lord to do things now. But the Lord doesn't work according to our timetable.

[21 : 20] The Lord works all things according to His timetable. But the wonderful thing about the Lord is that He doesn't give us everything we want. The Lord gives us everything we need.

And the Lord does that in order to teach us to depend less upon ourselves and more upon Him. The Lord teaches us to wait upon Him in prayer and to depend upon the promises of His Word.

And you know, is that not what David learned in Psalm 40? We all know the opening words of Psalm 40. David says, I waited for the Lord my God and patiently did bear.

At length to me He did incline my voice and cry to hear. Do you know what David learned? David learned that salvation in Jesus Christ, it's not about following a set of rules services or attending church services or reading your Bible.

David learned that salvation is all about depending upon the Lord. David learned that salvation is all about waiting upon the Lord. Salvation is all about hoping in the Lord.

[22 : 24] Salvation is all about trusting in the Lord. Because it's only when David was depending upon the promises of the Lord, it's only when David was trusting in the Word of the Lord, it's only when David was waiting upon the Lord that he could say, he took me from a fearful pit.

And from the miry clay and on a rock he set my feet, establishing my way. When David learned to depend not upon himself but to depend upon the Lord, that's when he discovered what salvation really is.

But my friend, dependence upon the Lord doesn't just take place at the start of the Christian life. It's part of your whole Christian life. Where we're to wait upon the Lord in prayer and depend continually upon his promises.

And it applies to every area of our lives. Whether we're praying for something, whether it's a job or a relationship or guidance, or whether we're praying about someone, an unconverted spouse, unconverted children, unconverted friends, unconverted family, someone who's sick, someone who's suffering.

Whether we're praying about something or someone, we have to wait upon the Lord in prayer and depend upon his promises. And like Sarah who had to wait 25 years to see the Lord's promise fulfilled, the fact that she had to wait upon the Lord wasn't to make her stop waiting and just give up.

[23 : 58] It was to teach her. And it was to teach us to depend less upon ourselves and more upon the Lord. It was all that waiting.

It was to teach her and to teach us not to look at the problem, but to look to the promise. And you know, as Sarah learned to wait upon the Lord by faith, she learned dependence.

And as we learn to wait upon the Lord by faith, we will learn dependence. But you know, as Sarah near the end of her life, she also made a discovery.

That's what I'd like us to see lastly. Sarah discovering. We've seen Sarah doubting, Sarah depending. Lastly, Sarah discovering. Sarah discovering.

Look at verse 11 again. It says, By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

[25 : 06] Therefore from one man and him as good as dead, there were born descendants, as many as the stars of heaven, and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

In these verses in Hebrews 11, they describe the narrative of Sarah's life. And the narrative of her life was faith waiting.

Sarah learned to wait upon the Lord's promise. But as we said, there were many times that Sarah doubted. And yet through 25 years of teaching, Sarah learned to depend upon the Lord.

But as the narrative of Sarah's life came to an end, it comes to the end of, at the close of Genesis chapter 22, beginning of 23.

Just at the end of chapter 22, Sarah makes this discovery. And what Sarah discovered, and what verse 12 highlights, is that God's promise of blessing to the world was much bigger than her.

[26 : 08] Because the promise of blessing given in Genesis 12, way back at the beginning, was that through the seed of Abraham, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And just before Sarah died, the Lord reaffirmed his promise to Abraham.

At the end of Genesis 22, the Lord said to Abraham, I will surely bless you. I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and as the sand that is on the seashore.

And that's what's been emphasized here in Hebrews 11. That that promise, it's still being fulfilled. That through one man, and him as good as dead.

It's an interesting description. Abraham was as good as dead. He was a hundred years old. And yet we're told in verse 12, 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. This was God's great plan. That many people the world over would come to know his son, Jesus Christ.

[27 : 14] This was God's great plan. And God's wonderful promise. And the amazing thing is, we are included in God's plan and God's promise. We can be part of this innumerable number by committing our life to Jesus Christ by faith.

And we can be part of God's plan of fulfilling his promise by being faithful and by being obedient to God's great commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

My friend, Sarah discovered that God's plan and God's promise, they were much bigger than her. Sarah discovered that she was only just a small part in God's promised salvation.

But Sarah also discovered that she had to be faithful. She had to be obedient in the small part that she was given by depending upon the Lord.

And you know, that's the discovery we have to make today. So that we will be faithful and obedient in our small part. Our small part that we're playing.

[28 : 26] We have to be faithful and obedient by fulfilling God's promise and plan of salvation. And you know, when you go to the end of the Bible, it's amazing how the whole Bible fits together.

That's what we see with the Apostle John. He has this vision of heaven. John is given this vision of heaven to remind us that God's plan and God's promise of salvation is much bigger than us.

Because when John received that vision of heaven, he saw this innumerable crowd of people gathered around the throne of Jesus. And John said that there was this great multitude that no man could number and they were from every nation, every tribe, every people and language.

And they're all standing before the throne. And they're before the Lamb. They're clothed in white robes and they're all singing, salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb who sits on the throne.

My friend, John was given that vision in order to remind us that God's plan and God's promise of salvation, it's much bigger than us.

[29 : 35] It's much bigger than us. But we have a part to play. We are part of this. And although it's a small part, just like it was a small part for Sarah, we have a small part in fulfilling God's plan and God's promise of salvation.

And like Sarah, we have to be faithful and obedient by depending upon the Lord. Because this wonderful promise, the wonderful promise is that there will be born descendants, as many as the stars of heaven, and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Like Sarah, we have to be faithful and obedient by depending upon the Lord by faith. It's a wonderful, wonderful narrative of Sarah's life.

Sarah was faith waiting. So we've seen Sarah, Sarah doubting, Sarah depending, Sarah discovering. And what Sarah discovered is anything too hard for the Lord.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, help us never to put restraints on thy power and what thou art able to do.

[31 : 03] Help us, Lord, never to try and put thee in a box or think that thou art one who is not able or powerful or mighty to save. But that thy word reminds us that thou art one who is mighty to save, who is able to save to the uttermost.

A God who is able to do in us and for us exceedingly, abundantly, above all, more than we could ask or even think. And help us, Lord, then to trust thee, to cast everything upon thee by faith and to keep looking to this Saviour who loved us and gave himself for us.

Bless us, Lord, together we pray thee. Bless thy word to our souls and bless the Lord's day to us. Help us, Lord, to rest in it, to wait patiently upon thee and to learn more and more of thy glorious grace.

Do us good, then we ask. Go before us, we plead, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We shall conclude our service by singing the words of Psalm 40.

Psalm 40, page 259. Singing from the beginning down to the verse marked four.

[32 : 28] I waited for the Lord my God and patiently and patiently did bear. At length to me he did incline my voice and cry to hear. He took me from a fearful pit and from the miry clay and on a rock he set my feet, establishing my way.

We'll sing on down to the verse marked four of Psalm 40 to God's praise. I waited for the Lord and patiently did bear.

I waited for the Lord my Lord and patiently did bear and lent to me him from the fearful pit, and from the mighty clay, and on a rock he set my feet, establishing my grave.

Be good on you, so get my mouth, a God to my divine, many shall see, and thou shalt fear, and on the Lord relies.

O blessed is the man whose trust upon the Lord relies, respecting not the proud or such,
as turn aside to lies.

[35 : 16] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.