

Hebrews 11v11. (Genesis 18:9-15)

11th October 2020 am Hill Arcadia and live streamed

“By faith... Sarah ...considered Him faithful who had promised”

Something **doesn't seem to add up** when you read the glowing commendation of Sarah in *Hebrews 11* compared to the unfolding years of drama in her and Abraham's unfolding life together in *Genesis*.

Back in Genesis we see that amongst some other troubles Sarah faced the hard challenge of **childlessness**

Women and men who have walked that difficult road will know that it is less of a walk and more of a **roller coaster ride** – fluctuating with moments of ecstatic joy and hope to seasons of dark disappointment and despair.

Take a look with me at **this life drama** that stretched over decades; exposing the struggle and heartache of...

1 Repeated unexpected disappointment

Their story starts with God's intervention in their lives commanding them to leave their roots and move to a land that He will show them. **Adding the promise**
...*Genesis 12:2 ...I will make you a great nation.*

The beginning of a **helpful timeline** is made know to us at the mention in v4 that some years later (after they - Abram and Sarai - had lived in Haran) when Abram
...*went as the Lord had told him... Abram was seventy five years old when he departed*

Keeping in mind that throughout this drama **the clock is ticking** – time does not stand still.

I imagine movement in **travel to be slow** on camels with families and livestock in tow.

In the course of time and clock ticking they get to the land of Canaan where God **repeats the promise** *Genesis 12: 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land”.*

If Sarai was like any other wife ready for children she would at this point **be over the moon with joy** anticipating the realization of a repeated promise from God.

Nothing happens. The months come and go and **there is no offspring**. Life happens and there is famine in the land and *Genesis 12:10 ...they went down to Egypt.*

The clock keeps ticking and they are on the move again *Genesis 13:1 ...they go up from Egypt to the Negev.* This is followed by their separation from Lot in *Genesis 13*; after which **confirmation of the promise** from God is again repeated.

Genesis 13:15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth...

We then observe **another chunk of Abram's time** taken up by rescuing Lot who had been taken captive in *Genesis 14*.

And then after his return *Genesis 14:17* from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him, there is the encounter Abram has with **Melchizedek**.

The clock is ticking and still there is no baby. Once again we read of **God reassuring** Abram in a vision in *Genesis 15:1* *"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."*

At this stage of things it is clear that **Abram's patience** (and Sarai alongside of him) is wearing thin; with Abram going on to giving God an explanation about the consequences of their childlessness, leaving a distant relative as his heir.

Genesis 15:2 "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

But again **God reassures** Abram *Genesis 15:4 "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*

This then is followed with God making **a covenant** with Abram in *Genesis 15:18*.

Don't forget that during all this time while things have been happening and the clock has been ticking and promises are being repeated **Sarai experienced** the monthly cycle of expectation followed by disappointment.

Is it **in desperation** she gives her servant Hagar to Abram to bear a son? It certainly sounds like – all this time – all the recurring promises – with unexpected disappointment year after year for 10 years since they arrived in Canaan.

Genesis 16:2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

Not surprisingly after Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, **bitter tensions** emerge between Sarai and Hagar... *Genesis 16:6 ...Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.*

And the **clock keeps ticking** and drama keeps unfolding... *Genesis 17:1 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,*

Once again God reminds Abram of the covenant he has with him, telling him he shall be *Genesis 17:4 ...the father of a multitude of nations...* going on to change his name from Abram to Abraham.

Another year passes with God getting specific about **the promise of a child by Sarai**, whose name He changes to Sarah ...*Genesis 17:16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.*"

Abraham is **somewhat sceptical** laughing to himself...*Genesis 17:17 ...Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?*

But God again **repeats** a son will be born *17:21 ...this time next year.*

Again the Lord appears to Abraham by *(18:1) ...the oaks of Mamre;* where the promise is repeated about "*this time next year Sarah will have a son*".

Followed by **Sarah's reaction** behind the door listening to the conversation.

Genesis 18:11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 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."

Life however carries on and we go on to read of **God rescuing Lot** from Sodom (*Genesis 19*) before he destroys the city for its gross sin. Abraham journeys around some more in *Genesis 20*.

And finally after all this time (25 years) of **disappointment, frustration and waiting** God does what he had promised.

Genesis 21:1 The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

How do we reconcile the roller coaster journey of repeated unexpected disappointment in *Genesis* reaching the very low point - when the angel of the Lord pronounced that she would conceive a child - *she laughed – a response seemingly indicating a mockery of the promises*, with the glowing commendation of Sarah in *Hebrews 11:11*?

Donald Guthrie notes, "*It is perhaps surprising to find Sarah spoken of as an example of faith, for according to Genesis she was more conspicuous as an example of doubt.*"

Why then as some have argued would she be **included in this Hall of faith** in *Hebrews 11*?

She is listed there because she is like so many of us **struggling with difficult issues**; knowing the pain of repeated unexpected disappointment...

2 Your faith may also come under fire

There was a time in my life when I reached a point of **crisis in my faith**. I believed I had a firm promise from God. It was also in a season of our marriage of years of childlessness.

Carol had reached a place of deep depression **feeling the pain** of inability to conceive - something that is easy and normal for most women – it was in that context where I believed I had received a promise from God.

2 Kings 4:16 And he said, "At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant."

Only to see what we thought was a **glimmer of hope** to be flushed down the toilet with the continued repeated unexpected disappointment – no child - month after month and year after year.

Some of you have your own stories; **singleness** – longing for God to give you the desire of your heart; **dreaded cancer** – praying and believing and being told that this illness will not end in death, and then it does; failing marriage, unemployment, unconverted children, unbelieving spouse, divorce, death of a child or loved one, persecution, betrayal...

Anyone of these and many more troubles in this life will **challenge your faith** and may even plunge you into a crisis of doubt.

In my season of crisis **3 questions** kept stirring in my mind:

- **Does God really exist?** Is He a figment of my imagination and just part of my cultural heritage? If that were true then it was time to walk away from the god of my imagination; and leave the church and religion.
- **Did God mislead me?** Is it possible that God would deliberately lead me or anyone else down the garden path with words and promises that evaporate into thin air?
- **Did I misunderstand the Scripture?** Have I distorted the Scriptures to tell me what I want to hear?

It is possible that after 25 years with an ageing body, passing the normal season for bearing children that Sarah's **faith was challenged**? Of course, because Sarah was human like us and not exempt from what Peter taught...

1 Peter 1:6 ... though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,

Her faith was tested, she had doubts and she reached the low point of a faith crisis... she asked questions, she may have reached a point of being sceptical and even laughed having heard the unfulfilled promise in her mind for the umpteenth time.

Does that **disqualify her** from being listed in the hall of faith? No definitely not because the truth being said, most believers walk of the road of a faith crisis – sometimes more than once or twice.

Those early Hebrew Christians needed to be encouraged in the seasons of their faith coming under fire. And we certainly need to see that when true faith comes under fire – *1 Peter 1:7 ...though tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Therefore in the final analysis **the record has it** for Sarah in *Hebrews 11:11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.*

It is true that your faith may come under fire but **it is also true** that like Sarah...

3 Your faith may also be strengthened

There is some **practical application** with regard to the promises of God in Sarah's life in her getting through and overcoming her crisis of faith.

3.1 Timing and the promises of God

Both Sarah and Abraham had to learn that **God's perfect timing** is not the same as their anticipated timing in fulfilling the promises He makes. In their minds 1 or 3 or 5 years would make sense but 25 years didn't fit into their scheme of things.

God will unfold His purposes according to His **redemptive purposes** and not our desired preferences.

Galatians 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

We too need to learn to **learn to wait** and trust God.

3.2 Trust and the promises of God

Trust has everything to do with **the nature of whoever is** giving the undertaking or making the promise.

In Sarah's case we can see at least 2 areas of **the nature of God** that she came to see and accept:

- **The faithfulness of God**

The strength of your faith will be **in direct proportion** to your estimation of the trustworthiness of God.

Sarah reached a point **where it could be said of her** ...*she considered him faithful who had promised.*

What she had doubted and even rejected as a possibility **changes to be** what she can believe and receive as true.

She came to see that **if God says it** then it is so. The very nature of God is that He is true to His word. God does not lie or mislead or misinform. The veracity of God is such that it cannot be compromised.

- **The ability of God**

She needed to be reminded in the midst of her faith crisis that **God's ability** is not limited by human opinions or natural laws.

Genesis 18:14 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."

And so at God's appointed time; God having been at work in Sarah's life refining her faith; her having come to see that God is indeed true to His word... *Sarah received power to conceive, even when she was past the age...*

3.3 Discernment and the promises of God

It was necessary for Sarah to **come to terms** with the truth that the promises given were from God to her and Abraham.

Along the way she seemed to waver in this regard by **seeking to engineer** offspring for Abraham by engaging the services of her servant Hagar.

As time unfolds **she discerns** that she was to be the mother of Isaac and the offspring of God's covenant promise.

It does prompt an important question and **hard lesson** for us: Is every promise in the Book mine?

I don't believe they are. **Some promises** are made specifically to individuals in a given situation for a specific purpose that God is doing. Other promises are general and true for all believers of all generations.

Back in my faith crisis I came to see that **I misunderstood God**. As that promise in 2 *Kings 4:16* was directed from God through Elisha specifically to the Shunammite woman.

So much "disappointment" with God **can be avoided** by so many Christians if a proper and responsible hermeneutic is applied. It is a dangerous faith affecting practise to take verses out of context and claim them as our own.

Conclusion

Take a moment to **consider** your particular present situation.

Are you in the midst of a 'faith crisis' **struggling** with doubt and wavering in your faith about the way ahead?

What legitimate promise in His Word are you clinging to? Keep clinging to it - whether it is for sanctification, daily bread, promised contentment, or the advancement of the kingdom.

Jeremiah Burroughs said it beautifully: *"Every time a godly man reads the Scriptures ... and there meets with a promise, he ought to lay his hand upon it and say, This is part of my inheritance, it is mine, and I am to live upon it."*

And also in view of **your status** as a stranger and exile in this world:

Believe God's Word concerning *"the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God"* (v. 10).

John Owen on his death bed said to his friend and editor William Payne: *"O brother ... the long-wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see the glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world."*

Owen had buried all eleven of his children in childhood. **The difficulties of life** did not dampen his faith; rather, God in His faithfulness used this as a means to strengthen his faith.