

Fourth Term Course: Men and Women of the Bible

Study Ten: Sarah, The Woman Who Saw the Glory

'Look to Sarah who Bore You'

These words are found in Isaiah 52:2 where Sarah is coupled with Abraham as a person of foundational faith. Hebrews 11: 11 Sarah's faith is commended, 'By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised'. As Abraham was a man of faith so Sarah was, with him, a woman of faith, and this must have been the basis of a significant marriage. Just as generations which followed were to remember Abraham and his relationship with God so they were also to remember Sarah also in the same vein. I Peter 3:1-6 Sarah is true wife and mother, 'And you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you'.

Abram (Abraham) and Sarai (Sarah)

Sarai is first mentioned in Genesis 11:27-31. Here she is the daughter-in-law of Terah the father of Abraham. The intention of the family was to go out of Ur of the Chaldees into Canaan but they stopped short at Haran, which was a place situated between Mesopotamia and the West, above the Euphrates, a city of idolatry. Joshua 24:2 shows that Terah's family was idolatrous. Sarai would have been an idol-worshipper. She was, in fact, Abraham's half-sister. Abraham asked her to agree to be called his sister so that he would not be killed and she be taken by Pharaoh for his harem (Genesis 12:10-20), and later by Abimelech king of Gerar for his harem also (Gen. 20:1-7; cf. 26: 1) Pharaoh gave Abraham great gifts but discovered through a visitation of plagues that Sarah was Abraham's wife and sent him from Egypt but did not take back the gifts given. Abraham was accumulating great riches. Abimelech, being told by God that Sarah was Abraham's wife rebuked the patriarch and again he was set on his way with further gifts and even liberty to dwell in the kingdom of Gerar..

God called Abraham at seventy-five years of age (cf Acts 7:2) to go to 'the land that I will show you'. Abraham took his family, including Lot his nephew, and they went into Canaan where, at Bethel, Abraham built an altar to the Lord, so that by this time Sarah must have become a follower of Yahweh and not an idolater. Whilst she would naturally change allegiance with her husband from the idols, it must have had to do with God showing His glory to Abraham, and so to her.

God's Care of Sarah and His Visitation Concerning Her

The two incidents above reveal two things, (i) Sarah was prepared to protect her husband from death, even at the expense of herself, and (ii) that God cared greatly for her, and doubtless this was linked with His plan for the covenant and its people to come. Sarah undoubtedly knew of God's appearances to Abraham, and they would not have been lost on her, especially in regard to the matter of covenant. In Genesis 18 we have the theophany of 'the three men' who appear. God also enquired after Sarah and repeated what He had previously said, that she would have a son by Abraham, and Sarah who was listening laughed (16:9-15). Abraham had done this previously (17:17-21). Her laugh was undoubtedly of unbelief-'the laughter of doubt', but it soon became 'the laughter of delight' when Isaac was born for his name meant 'laughter'. In 17:15f. God changed Sarai's name (at the age of 90) to Sarah, meaning 'princess' for she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.'

Abraham's name, we saw, was changed from 'exalted father' to 'father of a multitude of nations'. We can understand why God cared for her. He had shut up her womb, awaiting His miracle of the birth of Isaac. For some 70 years she had borne the reproach of her barrenness.

Sarah and Hagar

Hagar was a slave whom Sarah gave to Abraham as a concubine (16:1-6: cf. 30:1-13) to bring forth a child which she could count as hers in accordance with prevailing custom. Some see this act as one of 'jumping the gun' for the sake of covenant. Hagar despised Sarah for not being fruitful, and in return Sarah 'dealt harshly with her' (16:6). God gave Hagar a special angelic visitation. Ultimately Sarah, having borne and weaned Isaac drove Hagar out with her son Ishmael. God told Abraham that it was not Ishmael ('God hears') but Isaac through whom the covenant promises would be fulfilled. Even so, Ishmael was also to be a great nation (cf. 17:18-21; 21:8-14). It is interesting to note that God said to Abraham, 'Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you.' Sarah's desires coincided with God's will.

An Assessment of Sarah

(i) In I Peter 3:1-6 we have a picture of Sarah the wife. She called Abraham 'lord' (cf. Gen 18:12). What was there about Abraham that caused Sarah to obey him? Peter pictures her as submissive. She certainly posed as his sister to Pharaoh and Abimelech in obedience to his request. Was it that through Abraham she saw the glory of God? Isaiah 52:1 and Hebrews 11: 11 show her as a woman of faith. People only come to faith then they see God through revelation. Was it that Sarah admired Abraham, even though seeing his faults? Is this the message of I Peter 3:1-6? Note that the relationship of Abraham with God opened the way for her to be a woman of faith. The marriage was strong because they were in the vocation to which God had called them.

(ii) Sarah must have had regard for the great covenant God made with Abraham. Many times she had heard the message and been told that through her would the promise of many descendants be fulfilled. She wanted to be a mother of those to come and used Hagar as the instrument, but the plan backfired. We can see her jealousy and anger in regard to both Hagar and Ishmael and such were a mixture of personal humiliation and dislike as well as regard for the covenant.. In all this God had care for Hagar as well as for Sarah.

(iii) Paul pictures her as 'the free woman' in Galatians 4:21-31, even though he does not mention her by name. Ishmael was born of bondage but Isaac was born of the Spirit. This must mean that Sarah was a woman of the Spirit. Paul, without mentioning her by name. speaks of her as 'the Jerusalem above' and adds that she is free, and that 'she is our mother'. Sarah was important to the covenant.

(iv) To a great degree Abraham's greatness and pursuit of the covenant depended upon Sarah. Her 'saving' of Abraham by posing as a sister, was the gesture of love and faithfulness. At the same time she was fallible in her actions with Hagar. In a strange way she was justified in much that she did, even in relation to Hagar.