

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Genesis 17:15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-7

Lesson Title: A Promise to Sarah

Introduction

Have you ever heard the phrase, "Behind every great man there's a great woman?" While the origin and original purpose of that phrase is unknown, it is true in many cases. No one would question that Abraham, "*...who is the father of us all*" (Romans 4:16) was a great man, but what about his wife Sarah? Was she a great woman? In all honesty there are times in the Bible when Sarah comes off as a bit of an unpleasant, bad-tempered woman. Sometimes she behaved badly.

Sarah's faults are obvious enough. She was certainly not a perfect woman and wife. Yet, in spite of her failures, the Bible says, "*Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised*" (Hebrews 11:11). God had promised Abraham a seed and had made it plain that the seed was to come through Sarah, but how? Sarah was ninety years old and long past the time when she could have children. The answer was in the promise!

From the time Sarah became Abraham's wife, Sarah desired one thing above everything else, and that was to bear children. But she was barren throughout her normal child bearing years. In fact, one of the first things recorded in Scripture about Sarah (Sarai) was "*Sarai was barren; she had no child*" (Genesis 11:30). That one statement sums up everything Scripture has to say about the first sixty-five years of Sarah's life. This was a terrible condition for Sarah and produced much strife and frustration in her private life and her marital life with Abraham. Nearly every recorded event of strain and tension in Sarah's household and relationship with Abraham was related to her barrenness.

As time went on things didn't get much better for Sarah. She spent years wanting children but no children came. After arriving in Canaan, Sarah had waited for ten years to conceive. Abraham is in his mid-eighties and Sarah isn't getting any younger herself. She finally concluded that God Himself had caused her to be barren and there was no way she could be the mother of Abraham's children (Genesis 16:2). As a result, without seeking the Lord, she encourages Abraham to have children by Hagar, Sarah's handmaid (Genesis 16:1-4). That decision resulted

in the birth of Ishmael was proved to be a seed bed of anger, hostility, and resentment.

As Genesis 17 opens, God revealed Himself to Abraham with a new name: "*Almighty God*," (Genesis 17:1). This particular name of God highlighted God's omnipotence. After hearing the promise that Abraham would be the father of a nation so many times, Abraham might have been wondering whether he would ever see the son who would fulfill those promises. God's name, "*Almighty God*" (Genesis 17:1) was a needed reminder to Abraham that nothing was too hard for God. Not even at this late stage in life.

The Promise Expanded (Genesis 17:15-17)

Verse 15-16

"And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her."

Having talked about His covenant with Abraham and then expanding on how circumcision was to be the distinguishing mark of Abraham and his family, the Lord then turns to the subject of Sarah, Abraham's wife. There's no indication that Sarah was present to hear this conversation between God and Abraham although she is part of the subject of the conversation. It is most likely that she heard about the conversation from Abraham.

"As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be." God's promised child needed a mother, and only "Sarai" qualified. She, like Abraham, needed a name that proclaimed God's purpose among the nations. From this point on her name would no longer be "Sarai," meaning "my princess," but "Sarah," meaning "princess." By removing the possessive pronoun "my," in front of "princess," the Lord was taking away her personal name, "Sarai," the Lord gave her a positional name, "Sarah" because she was going to "be a mother of nations."

God promised to "bless her, and give thee a son also of her." In order for Sarah to become "a mother of nations" God would certainly have to "bless her." This barren woman would need God's blessing in order to conceive and give birth. God promised to "give a son" to Abraham "also of her." The promised child would come through Sara. The "blessing" promised here reached far beyond the present into the future and included the fact that "kings of people" would be part of

Abraham and Sarah's descendants. The fulfillment for this aspect of the promise begins when Saul becomes Israel's first genuine king more than 1,000 years later. The final king in the long line is Jesus Christ, the "*King of kings*" (Revelation 17:14).

Verse 17

"Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?"

There are a lot of different types of laughter in the world. There are those who foolishly laugh at sin and the filthy jokes of the world. There is that laughter that comes from a merry heart and is good for the soul of man. When Abraham "fell upon his face, and laughed," there was probably as much relief and gladness in his laughter than anything else. His laughter was not disrespectful or sinful. Abraham is on "his face" on the ground in humility before God. He just collapsed in a respectful and amazed laughter at the prospect of a hundred year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman having a baby.

Sometimes God's promises and God's plan doesn't make sense to us. Even though God had repeatedly stated His promise of Abraham having a child when God expanded that promise to include Abraham's barren wife he just had difficulty grasping it all. But don't mistake Abraham's laughter and difficulty processing all this information as unbelief. In Romans 4:20-21, the apostle Paul speaking of this very moment said, "*He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*"

The Promise Explained (Genesis 18:9-15)

In Genesis 17:22, the Bible says, "*And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.*" Before God finished speaking with Abraham He promised to bless Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, and He told Abraham to name the son he would have with Sarah, Isaac (Genesis 17:19-20). As Abraham's conversation with the Lord concluded he proceeded to obey the Lord by circumcising Ishmael, his house, and every male in Abraham's house (Genesis 17:23-27).

Abraham could have given the Lord a hundred excuses why he couldn't obey the Lord or believe what the Lord had said. Instead, he obeys the Lord as he waits on God's promise to be fulfilled.

Maybe you are waiting on a promise of God to be fulfilled in your life. What should you do? The obvious answer is, like Abraham obey the Lord in every way possible.

The next time the Lord appeared to Abraham, one of His purposes in doing so was to renew and further explain the promise for Sarah's sake so she could hear it with her own ears. Genesis 18:1 says, "*And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day.*" As Genesis 18 opens we have a description of how the Lord visited Abraham with two angels. Abraham, in typical Eastern fashion, graciously receives the three guests (the Lord and two angels), offering welcome and refreshment (Genesis 18:2-8).

Verse 9

"And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent."

As the three guests sat and ate with Abraham, "they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent." The words indicate that Sarah is close enough to hear the conversation taking place between Abraham and the visitors.

Verse 10-12

"And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

One of the guests speaks and says, "I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life..." This "he" is the Lord Jesus in a pre-incarnate appearance. Abraham is sitting at the oak trees of Mamre and Jesus is talking to him about the promised conception and birth of Isaac. When Jesus says, "Sarah thy wife shall have a son," Sarah, who was doing a little eavesdropping

"laughed within herself." It has been twenty-five years since God gave Abraham this promise and both he and Sarah are now well past child bearing years. It is possible that the long delay in the promise being fulfilled had weakened their faith which resulted in Sarah's laughter. Her laughter, like Abraham's, doesn't seem to be out right doubt but rather amazement at the possibility of having a child at her age.

Verse 13-14

"And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

The Lord, not allowing Sarah's response to slide, asks a question to Abraham to further emphasize the ability of God to make all of this come to pass. The Lord wants to know why Sarah treated this promise as if it is impossible. The Lord wants to know if anything "is too hard for the Lord?"

Verse 15

"Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh."

Sarah steps out from her close by location to defend herself. She said, "I laughed not; for she was afraid." Her denial was motivated by her fear. Remember, Sarah had not laughed out loud. She laughed "within herself." When the Lord replied, "Nay; but thou didst laugh," Sarah realized this stranger who was speaking knew everything about her.

Question: What's going on in your life that is challenging your faith? Is there some promise God has given that He has not yet fulfilled? Is there a prayer request that hasn't been answered? And what is it today that you consider to be "too hard for the Lord?" Oh, you would never say that out loud, but like Sarah, you've said it a hundred times under your breath.

The Promise Experienced (Genesis 21:1-7)

The days and year that followed that memorable meeting between Abraham, Sarah, and the three heavenly visitors were difficult for Abraham and Sarah. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-19:29). During this same period Abraham traveled south again, this time into the land ruled by Abimelech, king of Gerar. What had happened twenty-five years earlier in Egypt when Pharaoh made a sexual pass at Sarah happened again as Abimelech pursued her. Although Sarah is ninety years old, she was still a beautiful woman and with her appearance was able to stir the passions of a king. Abimelech, having been warned by God not to touch Sarah, was very gracious to Abraham in letting him dwell in the land (Genesis 20:15).

Verse 1

"And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken."

Immediately after the incident with Abimelech, "the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken." The Lord was good to Sarah and kept His promise. There are four words in two separate phrases in this verse that are so important. They are, "as he had said," and "as he had spoken." God keeps His promises!

In Genesis 17:21, God told Abraham, *"But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year."* Abraham and Sarah now knew that God was faithful in every detail of His promise. God's visitation upon Sarah and her conception of Isaac was precise and exactly as God said. When things are just right in God's eyes and when the right moment has come, God keeps His promises.

Verse 2

"For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him."

How can twenty-five years of waiting on God's promise to be fulfilled be summarized in twenty-three words? This verse is filled with basic facts of the promise. "Sarah conceived." She was biologically able but she did. Sarah "bore Abraham a son in his old age." She wasn't physically able to do that, neither was Abraham, but it happened.

"At the set time of which God had spoken to him" means the promise was fulfilled not a day earlier and not a day late. God doesn't operate on our timetables. He isn't ruled by wristwatches and appointment books. His promises are timeless and they are fulfilled more by our obedience than by our calendars!

Commenting on the words, "set time," preacher and author, F.B. Meyer writes, "God has His set times. It is not for us to know them; indeed, we cannot know them; we must wait for them. If God had told Abraham in Haran that he must wait for thirty years until he pressed the promised child to his bosom, his heart would have failed him. So, in gracious love, the length of the weary years was hidden, and only as they were nearly spent, and there were only a few more months to wait, God told him, 'At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the

time of life, and Sarah shall have a son'." (*F.B. Meyer, Abraham: The Obedience of Faith, 1968, p. 119.*)

Verse 3-4

"And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him."

Abraham's joy over the birth of "his son" is clearly indicated in his naming the child and in his obedience to the Lord in circumcising him. Abraham named his son "Isaac," as God had commanded him in Genesis 17:19. The name "Isaac" means, "He laughs." Isaac's name would be a constant reminder to both Abraham and Sarah of their responses to God's promise of a son. Every time Abraham or Sarah called out, "Isaac," their minds would go back to how they reacted when God spoke His words of promise to them.

"Eight days" after Isaac's birth, Abraham circumcised his son in the same manner God had earlier required of all the males in his household. Circumcision is the mark of the Jew; it provides an outward sign for God's people (Genesis 17:10-12). As he cut away for foreskin of Isaac, it was a sign that this promised son was one of God's chosen race.

Verse 5

"And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him."

The words of this verse may seem out of place and unnecessary. Just the opposite is the true. Think about these words, "an hundred years old...when Isaac was born." Amazing isn't it? Since God first called Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees and gave him the promise of a land and a seed that would number more than the stars of the heaven, Abraham had waited. Now that he is "an hundred years old," no one can give glory or credit to anyone except Almighty God!

Maybe you're thinking God has forgotten about you today. Maybe you're thinking God has forgotten about your family or it's too late, or it's been too long. Take courage child of God. God know who you are, where you are, and when to meet your needs.

Verse 6-7

"And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age."

Again the subject of laughter is in this beautiful story. Sarah is convinced that she and Abraham will not be the only ones to laugh about what has taken place. When others "hear" the story of Isaac's birth they "will laugh with" her. When God keeps His promises it is an experience of shared joy among all who know His strength and power.

The words of verses 6-7 give us an insight into Sarah's character by the fact that she saw genuine humor in the way God had dealt with her. "Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age." In other words, Sarah said, "Who would have dared to tell Abraham that I would be nursing his son as old as he is."

Conclusion

Sarah was a truly extraordinary woman. She had her faults and failures as we all do, but she also had her faith. The next time you realize that you are part of God's great plan, remember Sarah. The next time you are tempted to work things out on your own, remember Sarah. The next time God asks you to wait and be patient, remember Sarah. The next time you look at a situation that seems impossible, remember Sarah. The next time God does something so amazing in your life that you laugh, remember Sarah. And the next time you rejoice at what God has done, remember Sarah!

Amen.