

Impossible Faith

Hebrews 11:11-12

Introduction

Hebrews 11 has long been called “The Hall of Faith”. In the chapter we have been given an explanation of faith (vv.1-2) and examples of faith (vv.4-5; 7-40). We considered Abel’s worship; Enoch’s walk; Noah’s warning; Abraham’s obedience; and now Sarah’s willingness to believe the impossible (v.11a). In the chapter the writer speaks of the individual’s faith; what they did and their reward. Abel presented an acceptable offering in worship; Enoch left the earth without dying; Noah survived a great flood; Abraham inherited a promised land; and Sarah bore a child; but not just any child; but a child of promise; a barren womb would become the beginning of a wondrous nation. Faith is the assurance that the thing God has said in His Word is true. Faith is the confidence that God will act according to what He has said in His Word. Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible! We have seen that faith’s borders extend far beyond believing, but includes speaking and walking. Faith expects from God what might seem on the surface not possible.

Sarah’s story along with her husband Abraham is found in Genesis 12-24. Abraham was given a sevenfold promise in Genesis 11:31. God said;

1. I will make of thee a great nation.
2. I will bless thee.
3. I will make thy name great.
4. You will be a blessing.
5. I will bless them that bless thee.
6. I will curse those that curse you.
7. I thee all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

We would be less than honest if we suggested that Abraham’s influence and actions were always a great example to Sarah. We could speak of Abraham’s courage; but also his cowardice and carnality. When the land was in the midst of a great famine, Abraham left the promised land and went to Egypt. This is the first mention of Egypt in the Bible. Egypt is a type and a picture of this world. Later the Lord would say; “Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help. . .and trust in chariots and horsemen. . .but . . .look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord” (Isaiah 31:1). In a spiritual sense—when a Christian goes to Egypt—they seek to depend on someone or something other than the Lord. Abraham lied—and Sarah faced certain dangers. Pharaoh planned to marry Sarah but was plagued by God and eventually Abrahams deception was discovered. Abraham not only grieved God; became a poor testimony; caused Pharaoh to be afflicted; but he weakened his wife’s faith. It is of course in Egypt where Abraham secures Hagar as a servant to his wife and later a mistress for himself.

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A Willing Faith (v.11a)

Hebrews 11:11 (NKJV) 11By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed,

In Genesis 18 we read the story of Abraham being met by two Angels the Lord Himself near Hebron. Abraham instructs his wife Sarah to prepare a meal (Gen.18:6); and Abraham ran to the herd picked out a young tender calf and gave it to a young man to prepare it. The visitors asked where is Sarah your wife and Abraham said “Here, in the tent” (v.9). Genesis 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?” (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 (Hebrew Too wonderful Isa. 9:6) for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.” (15) But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh!”

Sarah overheard the promise of a son. She expressed doubt—laughs in unbelief! The Lord answers; “Is anything too hard (wonderful) for the Lord? Sarah will have a son. Sarah denies she laughs in unbelief (Genesis 18:15).

Does that surprise you? Sarah’s journey of faith experiences some bumps along the way. Os Guinness said, “If faith does not resolve doubt doubt will dissolve faith.”

Doubt can act like a corrosive element. We are given a promise. We are offered an opportunity to believe. Andrew Murray said, “Feed your faith and starve your doubts to death!”

Doubt sees the obstacles
Faith sees the way.
Doubt sees the darkest night
Faith sees the day.
Doubt dreads to take a step
Faith soars on high.
Doubt questions, “Who believes?”
Faith answers, “I.”

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Later in Genesis 21: 1-5 we read; “And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. (2) And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at

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the set time of which God had spoken to him. (3) And Abraham called the name of his own who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac”.

In Genesis 18 God makes a promise. In Genesis 21 baby Isaac is born.

In Genesis 21:5 we learn that Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

“Twenty-five years after the first theophany, the promised son was born to Sarah. Sarah was now about ninety years old, and humanly speaking past the age of bearing children. It was divine grace and power alone that brought the joy, light, and laughter of little Isaac into her life. Faith had triumphed, and there was happiness in the tent of Sarah” (*Women in the Bible; Frances Vander Velde p. 25*).

Paul will later speak of Sarah as a type of Grace; she is the freewoman—and of the Jerusalem above (see Galatians 4:22-31).

Paul sees in the story of Abraham and Sarah two sons; Ishmael and Isaac. The bondswoman is Hagar and the freewoman Sarah. Ishmael was born as a result of compromise and unbelief and human reasoning and lack of faith. Isaac on the other hand was given to Abraham and Sarah by the promise of God. Paul suggests the story has a deeper meaning; a symbolic meaning; the real significance of the events reveal something else. The two women represent two covenants; Hagar the covenant of the law, and Sarah the covenant grace. The law was given on Mount Sinai; and strange as it may seem—the word “Hagar” in the Arabic language means Rock—and the Arabs call Mount Sinai “the rock”. The covenant given at Sinai produced slavery; and so Hagar—a slave girl—Paul sees as a fitting symbol for slavery! Hagar represented the earthly Jerusalem—the capitol of the Jewish nation; the center of unsaved Jews! Unsaved Jews—seeking a righteousness—obtained by ritual and obtained by legal observance—obtained by keeping the law!!! The unsaved Jew—and the children of the unsaved Jew—and their followers were in bondage! For Paul to link the unsaved Jew and earthly Jerusalem with Hagar rather than Sarah—and Ishmael rather than Isaac—must have been a stinging—bitter—harsh—rebuke.

In Galatians 4:26; “But the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. (v.27) For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.” (v.28) Now we brethren as Isaac was, are children of promise.” (v.29) But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. (v.30) Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondswoman and her son, for the son of the bondswoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” (v.31) So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondswoman but of the free.”

Paul quotes the passage in Isaiah to point out that one day the spiritual descendants of Jesus would outnumber the physical descendants of Abraham.

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Sarah spent much of her life barren! Hagar was the woman who had a husband (Abraham). True believers are not born—Jews—or the will of the flesh—or the will of man but of God. Natural birth—is not what counts—spiritual birth is what counts! This birth comes by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ! Ishmael mocked Isaac. And so it is—those who are born of the flesh mock those who are born of the Spirit.

Is Paul condemning Arabs or the descendants of Ishmael? No! He is using the historical event as a picture of the present and future! There are two kinds of people on the planet earth. Those born after the flesh; and those born again by the Holy Spirit. We stand fast in our liberty by Jesus. Paul encouraged the Galatians to avoid getting entangled in the yoke of bondage (a reference to Jewish legalism). How do we know? Because Paul goes on to describe the life of a Christian justified by faith alone!

Sarah received the power and the strength to believe God.

We know Sarah experienced a crisis of faith. How else do we explain Sarah's invitation to Abraham to take her maid servant Hagar? Did her faith fail? In one sense yes. Her faith may have failed but God's promise never failed!

Men and women of faith may experience a lapse of faith!

Did Sarah doubt that God would make good His promise though her? Sarah and Abraham both entertained the notion that a compromise might work. Perhaps Abraham could impregnate Sarah's handmaid and help God with His promise! How did that work out? It was a disaster. For 13 long years Abraham received no fresh word from God (Gen.16:16; 17:1). John Phillips writes; "The solution was to believe God, something both Abraham and Sarah did, with the eventual result that the impossible happened. For what is impossible with men is not impossible with God" (see *Exploring Hebrews*; p.157).

A Trusting Faith (v.11b)

and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

How old was Sarah? Some Bible scholars suggest about 90 years old! The guinnessworldrecords.com lists Maria del Carmen Lara gave live birth (by caesarean section to two boys, Christian and Paul at the age of 66 years 358 days!

Other sources list Rajo Devi Lohan at 69 years and Omari Panwar of India 70 years!

Who made the promise to Sarah? The Lord God! The Creator God. The Sovereign Lord of the Universe. "she judged Him faithful". Sarah began to consider the promise and the one who made the promise. God is able to do what seems impossible to do. The promise did not seem

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possible. The promise must have seemed illogical, absurd, unthinkable, unbelievable, inconceivable! Pun intended.

Anatomically impossible.
All reason suggested not possible.
Nature itself screamed not possible.

Sarah took the journey from unbelief and doubt to belief. She trusted the promise of God. In order for God's Word to come true it would require a miraculous birth!

How does one begin such a journey? Sarah judged (counted) on God being faithful. Sarah counted on God's ability to speak; to tell the truth and keep His promise.

Jesus had an encounter with a rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-24). The young man asked the million dollar question; "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" You recall the answer Jesus gives; "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said, Which ones? Jesus said, "You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' honor your mother and father, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man replied, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack? Jesus said, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heave; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And I say to you, it is easier to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible!"

Not possible. Impossible. Jesus said in Mark 9:23; "If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes". The impossible becomes possible.

The Lord gave Sarah the strength and power to believe Him. In the Bible a man had a son who was demon possessed. The Lord Jesus told the man he could help him if he would believe. The man said, "I believe. Help thou mine unbelief." The man had weak faith but Jesus must have given him the faith because Jesus healed the boy (Mark 9:17-27).

Believe God can change you. "The King's heart is in the hand of the Lord. Like the rivers of waters, he turns it wherever he wishes" (Prov.21:1).

The Lord protects, empowers and even befuddles our enemies. The Lord strengthens and builds our character. He heals us, imparts wisdom to us and gives our lives purpose and direction.

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A Rewarding Faith (v.12)

12Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

The writer of Hebrews quotes the passage in Genesis 22:17; “blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore, and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.”

A willing faith and believing faith and trusting faith becomes a rewarding faith. And what reward? The gift of the seed of Isaac and through Isaac a nation; a multitude. But with that seed also the seed of Christ—a nation of believers; the creation of men and women; born again by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Think for a moment. In Isaac a multitude of physical children. In Jesus a multitude of spiritual children. Sarah not only believed the impossible but received a reward—she received the impossible! Israel exists today—because in part—Sarah believed something that seemed not simply implausible or highly unlikely; but impossible. God made what seemed like an impossible promise.

It seems impossible that sinful human beings could be saved under any circumstance.

“Faith gave Abraham and Sarah power to have a child when they were “as good as dead”. Abraham and his pilgrim descendants did not turn back, as the Hebrew leaders were tempted to do, but kept their eyes on God and pressed on to victory” (Wiersbe’s Outlines; p. 707).

The writer of Hebrews describes Abraham as “one man, and him as good as dead”. Abraham was not young. What did God have to work with? One very old man. One very old woman. Way past his prime.

Imagine you have problems conceiving a child. You go to a fertility clinic. How many couples would choose the jar marked Abraham? This is the human condition. Barren. Dead.

The Apostle Peter writes; “Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well” (I Peter 3:6).

Conclusion

Does God promise a baby to every barren couple? No. Does God promise a Savior for every barren soul that will believe by faith that Jesus Christ is Lord? The answer is yes!

Faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible!

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In chapter 11 Abel worship's God on God's terms. Enoch walks with God. Noah provides both a witness and warning to a world determined to reject God and embrace judgment. Abraham hears from God. God makes a promise to Abraham. Live by faith (v.9); be a pilgrim with a purpose (v.9); be a partner and partaker with God's people in the life of faith. Abraham's partner in part was Sarah. Sarah joins Abraham and at first doubts God—and then believes God—by faith. The circumstances seem impossible. But then she considers that it is God who has made the promise. The circumstances are simply difficult—they were impossible. Reason argued—not possible. Biology argued—not possible. In order for God's promise to come true—it would require a miracle! Sarah believed the impossible. And Sarah received an impossible reward.