

Isaiah 51:1-3, Hebrews 11:8-12

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[0 : 0 0] Do you pursue righteousness? Do you seek the Lord?

Well, listen to what God recommends to those who pursue righteousness, to those who seek the Lord, a recommendation that we find in the book of Isaiah.

We've read the words at the beginning of chapter 51. Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn.

Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth. This might seem a strange recommendation to those who are pursuing righteousness, who are seeking the Lord, but God tells us that we are to look to Abraham and we are to look to Sarah in some sense.

And we want to do that particularly to Sarah this evening. But we do so on the recommendation of God himself in these words in Isaiah.

[1 : 1 1] You'll remember that a couple of weeks ago when we began this series on women in Genesis, we began obviously with Eve and we identified her as our mother, Eve.

Well, today we want to consider our mother, Sarah. The language that God uses through Isaiah allows us to use that language.

God is speaking to God's people and he says, to look to Sarah who gave you birth. Now, clearly Sarah had not physically given birth to those to whom these words are directed.

But nonetheless, she is identified as their mother, as the mother of God's people. Eve, who we thought about a couple of weeks ago, is in a sense our physical mother.

We all are the product of Eve. We can trace a physical descent from Eve. Sarah, we could think of or describe as our spiritual mother.

[2 : 1 7] I don't know if you ever sang the chorus when you were a child. Father Abraham has many sons. Many sons as Father Abraham. Maybe not as a child, maybe as a grown-up. Well, maybe there should be a second verse to that chorus.

Mother Sarah has many sons. Many sons and daughters as Mother Sarah. In these verses that we've read twice now, God, through Isaiah, urges us to look to Abraham and Sarah.

And when we look, what do we see? What does God want us to see? Well, I think if we focus on what is said in the chapter in Isaiah, principally, we are to see what God does for and through the weak and the unlikely.

I think it is striking what God immediately goes on to say. Having urged His people to look to Abraham, to look to Sarah, He then says, When I called him, when I called Abraham, he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many.

So, the focus really is on seeing Abraham and seeing how, though he was only one man, though he was weak, though the prospects of him being a great man were very small, yet God did great things in and through him.

[3 : 43] And so, we looked at Abraham, we looked at Sarah, but that in doing so, we would see their God and all that God did in and through them. But as well as seeing a man and woman blessed by God, we see a man and woman who believed or trusted in God, and that we also have on the authority of God's Word.

And that takes us to the second passage that we read in Hebrews chapter 11. And if we focus in particularly on Sarah, in chapter 11, verse 11, we read, This is quite a striking affirmation on the part of the writer of this letter to the Hebrews.

It attributes something that lies in the sole prerogative and power of God, the granting of a child to a woman who was past childbearing age, as attributable, at least in part, to the faith of the one so blessed, the faith of Sarah.

Why did she enjoy this blessing? Well, we're told, because she considered him faithful, who had made the promise. Now, the object of Sarah's faith is, of course, our faithful God who keeps His Word.

But Sarah is commended for the measure of faith that she had in believing the promise that God made to her. So what I want to do this evening is to follow Sarah's life, a whistle-stop tour, but in relation particularly to the promise that was made to Abraham, and by extension to Sarah as well, and to the God who made the promise.

[5 : 36] What does Sarah do with the promise? What do we do with God's promises that are directed to us? So let's head to Genesis and follow the story of Sarah, but from this perspective of the promise that she received and the manner in which she believed it or didn't believe it or came to believe it, all of these things hopefully will become clearer as we make our way through the account in Genesis.

Now, Sarah comes up quite a lot over a number of chapters, from chapter 12 right through to chapter 20 and indeed beyond. So there's quite a lot of ground to cover, but we're going to do so really, as I say, just a swift tour of her life along the lines that I've indicated.

First of all, we meet Sarah as one who we could say receives the promise. In Genesis chapter 12, let's turn to Genesis chapter 12, which is really the first time that we come across Sarah, and there is a reference to her just at the end of chapter 11.

But in Genesis chapter 12, we have the call of Abraham. And in many ways, very little is said about Sarah in this chapter. But nonetheless, in the making of the call to Abraham, a promise is directed to Abraham.

And a promise that he would be the father of a great nation. And of course, implicit in that was the need for offspring who would become this great nation.

[7 : 16] So the promise is directed to Abraham. Abraham is married to Sarah, and so Sarah clearly is also the object of this promise. I think we can reasonably presume that Abraham told her about the promise.

After all, as a result of this call and promise, they headed into the unknown. And how could he possibly have explained this rather unexpected venture had it not been for this message that he had received from God?

I wonder how Sarah viewed God's promise. It had been directed to Abraham. Abraham, we're presuming, shared it with Sarah. What did she make of the promise? Sarah, of course, at this point already knew that she was not able to have children.

In chapter 11, and in verse 30, we read now, Sarah was childless because she was not able to conceive. She knew that. So what did she make of this promise?

It was seemingly out of the blue that her husband, presumably with her, would not only have a child, but that child would then lead to a nation tracing their descent from Abraham and Sarah.

[8 : 25] Well, we don't know what she made of that promise. Did she doubt the promise given what she knew about her own condition and limitations? We don't know. What we're told is that they set out to the land that they were sent to, that they arrived, and so there, the language speaks not only of Abraham, but also those who accompanied him, and very especially Sarah.

Sarah went with her husband. This in itself was an act of faith, certainly in some measure. But then, as we follow the story in verses 6 and 7, we have recorded what might well have struck fear or uncertainty in the heart of Sarah.

We read there in chapter 12 and verse 6, Abraham traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Mori at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. That in itself would have been quite frightening, but particularly verse 7, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, to your offspring, I will give this land.

So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. And again, Abraham would have no doubt shared that with Sarah. God's spoken to me again. He said, to our offspring, he will give this land.

And I wonder if even that word just created great doubt and fear and uncertainty in the heart of Sarah. How can this be? How can I be part of this?

[9 : 51] I can't have children. We can't have children. Of what offspring is God speaking? Will I be involved? Will somebody else be involved? Because I can't be involved.

This promise, it can't be fulfilled with my involvement. And so the promise, a wonderful promise perhaps, was for Sarah, a source of fear and concern and anxiety.

Of course, we know the outcome of the story. We know that Abraham would become the father of multitudes and that through him would come the Messiah. And so we look back from the perspective of knowing the outcome.

But try to imagine weighing up the promise as somebody on the ground at the time. The whole thing just didn't make any sense. Perhaps some might have dismissed Abraham.

Perhaps some did dismiss Abraham as some crazy guy who hear voices from God. We sometimes hear about that, don't we? We hear about people on the news and they did something because they heard a voice from God and they're dismissed.

[10 : 58] These are crazy people. Maybe we shouldn't be so dismissive in that no doubt there are real issues and problems that we should be more sympathetic to. But we don't take that kind of language or that kind of testimony seriously, and perhaps rightly so.

I wonder if some thought Abraham was equally deluded in these pretensions that God was speaking to him and making these promises that everybody knew couldn't possibly come true, certainly not with the wife that he had.

But Sarah received the promise and, as far as we can tell, went along with it. But as the story continues, we then see how Sarah and Abraham in some way forget the promise or certainly don't live in the light of the promise.

in chapter 12, that same chapter 12 from verse 10 and onwards we have the account that we're familiar with of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt. You know the story how they turn to Egypt.

The reason they go to Egypt is because of famine in the land. So things are just going from bad to worse. And so they head to Egypt hoping for supplies, but there's this great fear that Sarah, who we're told was very beautiful, would be taken by the Egyptians.

[12 : 20] And that this plan is hatched to provide protection for Abraham in particular, that she would say that he was, or she was, his sister.

Now the interesting thing here in terms of this plan that Abraham and Sarah are involved in, the words that Abraham directs to Sarah are not in the form of a command in verse 13 of chapter 12.

Say you are my sister so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you. And we subsequently discover that this was a prearranged plan in chapter 20 and verse 13, which we'll come to, which is another kind of chapter in the story.

A very similar situation arises, but at the moment all I want to focus in is what's said in verse 13 of chapter 20. And when God calls me to wander from my father's household, I said to her, this is Abraham explaining to Abimelech how he had done just the same thing, this is how you can show your love to me.

What anywhere, everywhere we go, say of me, he is my brother. So it's clear that this was something that Abraham and Sarah had arranged. They had anticipated that this might be an issue and so together they had agreed that this is what they would do.

[13 : 35] And so Sarah must bear some of the responsibility for this. I think Abraham bears the greatest burden of responsibility, but Sarah also shares part of it.

But what we know, and we don't have time to go into all the details of what happened, but what we do know is that God protects them despite their folly, despite their deceitfulness, despite their lack of trust in God's protection, God protects them in a miraculous way.

And I wonder if when Sarah was observing and reflecting on how she had been protected, how she had been returned to her husband unharmed, I wonder if she reflected on God's goodness and on God's protection and on the fact that God proved himself to be trustworthy.

I wonder if that reignited Sarah's faith or maybe ignited Sarah's faith when she witnessed the manner in which God acted in her life. favor and protection.

But then the story continues and the next time we meet Sarah is in chapter 16. And here, her relationship to the promise I'm describing is the time when she amends the promise.

[14 : 49] So in chapter 16, notice how it begins the chapter. We read now, Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. The years are passing as well. We don't have time to go into all the chronology, but we jump from chapter to chapter and we think it's all just a brief spell of time, but years and years are passing.

Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So she said to Abraham, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her.

So there's still this sense that there's a promise of God that there will be seed, that there will be an inheritance, that there will be offspring. But Sarah's working out and she's saying, well, it's not going to happen through me.

So we need to find another plan. She amends the promise or twists it according to her thinking. She's impatient and her trust in God is waning.

And notice what she does in the face of what she sees as an unfulfilled and unfulfillable promise. Well, first of all, she blames God or certainly grants to God the responsibility for her condition.

[16 : 02] The Lord has kept me from having children. So the very God who had said she would have children, she is accusing of keeping her from having children.

It's somewhat sobering that these are her first recorded words. Obviously, she has spoken many other words, but the first recorded words that we have of Seda are her accusing God of keeping her from having children.

And then, of course, what she does is she concocts her own plan. This is an I'll do it my way moment. She can secure what God has failed to deliver in her own way.

She can build a family, but she'll do it her way through her slave, Hagar. So she amends the promise. Well, what's the outcome of such folly?

Well, Abraham foolishly goes along with Sarai's plan. A child is born, but again, those of you familiar with the story know how it all ends in tears.

[17 : 00] It ends in tears and resentment and rivalry and bitterness. Such is the way of doing things our way. It all ends in tears.

But then we can see another moment or occasion when Sarah can be looked at in the light of God's promise. In chapter 18, we turn to chapter 18, it's just across the page in Genesis, and on this occasion we have recorded for us the visit of these three visitors.

Now in chapter 17, Abraham had once again received a reaffirmation from the part of God of the promise. And we're told that Abraham laughed when he heard this promise being reaffirmed.

You see, as the years passed, it became ever more unlikely. The older they got and the more time that passed without a child being born. But in chapter 17, Abraham is reminded of the promise and we're told that he laughed in the face of that reminder.

But then in chapter 18, you have this visit of these three mysterious men who in time it becomes apparent one of them is the Lord himself appearing in the form of a man to visit Abraham and Sarah.

[18 : 29] And now it's Sarah's turn to laugh. In chapter 9, rather in verse 9 of chapter 18, we read perhaps the most critical part of the occasion, Where is your wife Sarah?

The men asked Abraham. There in the tent, he said. Then one of them said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent which was behind him.

Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought. After I am worn out and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?

And then it goes on and in a moment we'll see what it says and what follows. Sarah laughs as this promise is brought to her hearing, perhaps for the first time from the voice of God through this divine envoy.

I know a couple of things about this. The visit of these three men and the conversation, though it's conducted with Abraham, is without doubt principally for Sarah's benefit. God is speaking to Sarah and she doesn't realize that as she surreptitiously listens in to the dialogue.

[19 : 45] But God knows who He intends to hear the words that are spoken. And Sarah laughs. She mocks the promise of God. And in this she was no different to her husband.

There's a curious way in which sometimes the laughter of Abraham and the laughter of Sarah are catalogued, I suppose.

It's often the case that Abraham's laughter is somehow redeemed or rebranded as the laughter of marvel at such an amazing promise rather than the laughter of mockery or disbelief.

But poor Sarah is very much identified as somebody who laughs in disbelief. Yet it's the very same word that is used both of Abraham and of Sarah.

And I think they need to be measured with the same bar. But as she mocks the promise perhaps if we were to stand in her defense we could acknowledge that the whole picture being painted by the visitors does appear to be a thing of fantasy.

[20 : 51] Who could believe such a promise? It's also striking that when Isaac is born, Sarah acknowledges that nobody believed that God would come good on his promise.

We jump ahead to chapter 21 in verse 7. So this is when Isaac is born. We'll come to that in a moment but I just want to notice something that she says that is relevant at this point. Sarah is celebrating the birth of her child and then she says this and she added who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?

Now it's a rhetorical question but the answer is clear. She's saying nobody believed. Nobody believed that I would have a child. We don't know how many people were privy to the promise but Sarah's saying nobody believed it.

How difficult it is to believe when you're surrounded by unbelief which was Sarah's circumstance. nobody believed and neither did Sarah at this point.

But what then happens? Well God speaks to her again. During this very same visit God speaks to her again through Abraham or through the conversation that is being had with Abraham and the message of God to Sarah who laughs at being reminded of the promise.

[22 : 09] The message of God includes three elements. First of all there's rebuke then there's what we might call revelation but then there's reassurance. So we're in chapter 18 and first of all the rebuke in verse 13.

Then the Lord said to Abraham so one of the three visitors is now being identified as the Lord. Then the Lord said to Abraham why did Sarah laugh and say will I really have a child now that I am old?

This is Sarah being rebuked. God is saying why did you say that? Why do you doubt? Why don't you believe the promise that I have given you? So she is being rebuked for her lack of faith.

But then the rebuke includes a revelation of a great truth concerning God for Sarah's benefit. Verse 14 Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? And so Sarah is being rebuked but then God is also telling her something about himself. He's saying nothing is too hard for me.

[23 : 10] Nothing is impossible for me. So you think this can't happen because it's impossible. Everybody around you says it's impossible. It's never happened before. Nobody's ever heard of such a thing. But then God says nothing is impossible for me.

So there's rebuke but then there's revelation of truth about God and then there's reassurance or rather or reassurance in the form of the promise being reiterated immediately after and there in verse 14.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. And what is the outcome of this word from God to Sarah?

Well I think we can conclude that the outcome of this word this word of rebuke this word of revelation this word of reassurance is that Sarah now believes the promise. That's certainly the implication of Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 11 where it says that she believed the promise.

You know we've read through the story so far and we don't have much evidence of her believing but Hebrews assures us that she did believe and so it seems to be reasonable that this is the point when she receives as it were a word from God a word of rebuke a word of revelation about who he is a word of reassurance she begins tentatively to believe that this could possibly be true.

[24 : 35] Hebrews tells us that she considered him faithful who made the promise and might it not be that it was at this point that she begins to consider him faithful. Why is it that she now believes when before she had found it so difficult to believe?

Well she receives God's rebuke she is instructed in God's character she embraces God's promise in short she listens to and believes God and in that she's no different to us for this reason alone we do well to look to Sarah and learn from Sarah this is how our faith is built up God engenders faith in us as he rebukes us as he reveals himself to us as he reiterates time and again his promises to us so we need to listen to his voice of rebuke of revelation of reassurance but let's move on a couple more parts to the story as we draw things to a close and the next part of the story is really in some ways very disappointing because having believed the promise we now find her questioning the promise in chapter 20 in chapter 20 now remember the man had said that within a year the child would be born so everything that follows in chapters 19 and 20 must be within that time scale of one year and as I say having come to believe the promise you would think well all is well no more doubt no more questioning no more disobedience just waiting for a few short months for the arrival of the firstborn but the year that was to follow was to be a tempestuous year it was a tempestuous year of waiting there is the account of Sodom and Gomorrah and then you have this very disappointing episode where lightning strikes twice this episode with Abimelech so almost exactly as it happened in Egypt

Abraham and Sarah find themselves in a region controlled by this king Abimelech and king Abimelech just like the Egyptians before him takes Sarah to be his wife or part of his entourage and what happens well Abraham and Sarah do exactly what they had done before in order to try and secure their safety again they sinfully doubt God's care and power now Abraham again I think bears a greater responsibility but Sarah is not without fault in the story of Sarah it's clear that she wasn't averse to putting forward proposals that Abraham agreed to she had a track record of getting her own way certainly on more than one occasion and so here it's difficult to suggest that she is guiltless in this incident with Abimelech and yet despite this stubborn refusal to trust in God the stubborn refusal to learn from past sin and past mistakes despite the fact that they had just received this remarkable visit from these men one of whom identifies himself as the Lord and who speaks and brings the word of God to them so soon after they're making the same mistake and I suppose really what that highlights for us is God's gracious dealings with them last night at the fundraiser the WFM's fundraiser where we're being taught a new hymn well new for us and the line that repeats throughout the hymn our sins they are many his mercy is more that certainly applies to

Abraham and Sarah here their sins they were many time and again failing to trust in God and yet God's mercy proved more and that of course wonderfully is true for us it's not a license for disobedience and sin but it is a comfort to know that though our sins they are many his mercy is more and again of course God protects them and I wonder what effect this would have had on Sarah's faith as she sees once again despite her foolishness God spares her and protects her and then finally the final part of the story that we're going to look at in relation to the promises finding Sarah rejoicing in the fulfillment of the promise in chapter 21 we have the birth of Isaac and there's this beautiful description of God's goodness to Sarah at the beginning of the chapter now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised

Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the very time God had promised him and so there's this careful manner in which the writer wants to stress God's fulfilling of his promises just as he had promised of doing for Sarah just as he had promised of being gracious to Sarah just as he had said and so even in the face of all her stumbling and tentative faith God was good to his promise and of course Sarah rejoices God has brought me laughter she had laughed at the promise of God and yet God grants her laughter as he keeps his promise and this is grace this is undeserved mercy when I was reading in Isaiah chapter 51 those first three verses I was struck by the language that is used of how God's people respond to God's goodness in verse 3 having been urged to look to Abraham to look to Sarah notice what it says we read again verse 3 of Isaiah 51 the Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins he will make her deserts like Eden her wastelands like the garden of the Lord joy and gladness will be found in her thanksgiving in the sound of singing and though no doubt this is a picture that looks forward to the new heavens and the new earth in a small way that was fulfilled on the day that Isaac was born and laughter was once again heard the laughter of joy and thanksgiving in the household of Abraham and Sarah and Sarah could testify

[31 : 06] God has brought me laughter this is our God this is your God your sins they are many his mercy is more why are we to look to Sarah why does God urge us to look to Sarah why is Sarah presented to us in the chapter there in Hebrews as a woman of faith why are we to acknowledge her as a woman of faith well there in Isaiah it says of us that we are hewn from the same rock as Abraham and Sarah we are like her we are slow to believe we are quick to forget we are prone to do our own thing we mess up once and then again and then again and just as Sarah did but God did not abandon Sarah while Sarah struggled to hold on to God God continued to hold on to her and we can and should draw encouragement from the fact that even such a tentative and often flawed faith was valued and honoured and recognised by a God and we can also draw lessons and warnings

God builds up our faith by drawing us to listen to his word to his rebukes his revelation of himself his reassurances and his promises and we need to listen to his voice we need to repent of our sin we need to believe in his word and trust in his person we sometimes think of the characters there in Hebrews 11 they're often described as the heroes of the faith great men and women of faith I think it's a particular encouragement that so often they weren't great men and women of faith their faith was stumbling it was tentative it was flawed in so many ways but it was genuine and sincere and God acknowledged it and recognised it and God was true to his promises even when their faith was so flickering and that remains true of us though our sins they are many his mercy is more well let's pray Heavenly Father we do thank you for your word we thank you for the manner in which we can read of those who like us have been called to yourself flawed infallible men and women we thank you for what we learn as we consider the life of Sarah we thank you for the manner in which you were gracious to her just as you said that you gave her a son just as you had promised at the time that you had promised we do thank you that though we are slow to trust in you you are ever looking out for us we thank you that you are the God who is faithful the God who keeps his promises you are the God who brings laughter even to those who laugh at you and for this we are grateful we acknowledge that our sins like Sarah and Abraham our sins are many but your mercy is more and we pray in Jesus name

Amen amen