

Sarah, the woman who had a miracle child. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 9 January 2008.
Reading : Gen. 17. 15-19; 18. 9-15; 21. 1-3, 5-7; Heb. 11. 11.

I don't know how many of you spotted the article in the press last week about the married couple from Hampshire who are poised to emigrate to New Zealand. What made the story newsworthy is that Eric and Doris King-Turner are 102 and 87 years of age respectively. And, in spite of a combined age of 189 years, they have decided to pack their bags and to set up home around the other side of the world – on the south island of New Zealand, from where Mrs King-Turner originally came and where they were married.

It is a remarkable story, but this morning I have been asked to read of an even more remarkable incident – dated around 4,000 years ago – when a married couple, with a combined age, not of 189 but of 190 years, had a son born to them. I refer to Abraham and Sarah – and our first reading is found in Genesis 17 ...

'When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared ... and said to him, "I am God Almighty ... As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name."¹ And I will bless her and will also give you a son by her ..."² Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to one who is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? ... And God said, " ... Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac'.³

Then, in the next chapter, Genesis 18, we read that *'the Lord appeared' to Abraham 'as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day'. In response to the question, "Where is Sarah your wife?", Abraham answered, "Behold, in the tent". And the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son". And Sarah was listening at the tent door which was behind Him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. And Sarah laughed in herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you ... and Sarah shall have a son". But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh", for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"⁴*

And, finally, from the New Testament – the letter to the Hebrews chapter 11 ...

'By faith Sarah herself ... received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she reckoned Him faithful who had promised'.⁵

And the biblical account of the birth of Isaac has much to tell us, not only about the faith of Abraham and Sarah, but also about the greatness and character of their God – and ours. And in our readings Sarah learnt something of His power, His knowledge and His faithfulness.

First, she discovered her God to be all-powerful. As a result of her faith in Him, she 'received power to conceive', we read – at the age of ninety – and the Lord gave her not only the strength to conceive and to bear a child – but also, according to chapter 21, which records the actual birth, the ability to nurse and feed her child until he was weaned.⁶ Indeed, you may have noticed that our reading this morning began with the Lord introducing Himself to Abraham with the words, 'I am God Almighty'⁷ – 'I am the all-sufficient, the all-powerful God'.

Yes, it was true that Sarah had been barren all her life. And, yes, it was true that, in any case, she was now well past the age of childbearing – but, as the Lord Himself asked Abraham following Sarah's incredulous laughter, 'Is anything too hard ('Is anything too difficult', that is) for the Lord?'⁸ What a tremendously encouraging text for us to take with us into the New Year. As Corrie Ten Boom once wrote, "Do not ask, 'What can I do?', but, 'What can He not do'".

But Sarah discovered her God to be, not only all-powerful, but also all-knowing. For we read that, although *'Sarah was listening at the tent door which was behind Him'* – behind the Lord, that is; out of His line of vision – and although she "laughed in herself" ... we read that the Lord then questioned Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?"

She may have been well out of sight and her laughter may have been only inward and silent, but God had heard her well enough. And it is a salutary fact that, though we can sometimes hide things from others, we can never hide anything from God – even our inward and most private thoughts and feelings.

Thirdly, and I have in mind that we have just begun a New Year, Sarah proved her God to be, not only all-powerful and all-knowing, but also One who is faithful to His word. As we read, 'she reckoned (she esteemed, counted) Him faithful who had promised'.⁹ And it would be difficult to imagine a more comforting assurance to carry us through 2008.

'She reckoned Him faithful who had promised' – and some nine months later the evidence of His faithfulness was there for all to see. For Genesis 21 opens with the words, 'And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of

which God had spoken'.¹⁰ God had kept His word, and, yes, as always, had acted right on schedule. Apart from the years Abraham and Sarah spent married, but childless, in Ur of the Chaldees and in Haran, they had lived together in Canaan for some 25 years.¹¹ Sarah had waited a *long* time for a son. But there was a wise purpose behind it all. God had His own reasons for keeping Abraham and Sarah waiting – mainly, no doubt, that, when He did intervene, there would, humanly speaking, be no possibility whatever of them having a child. It would therefore be evident to all that this was His doing.¹²

And we too can rest assured that God always has reasons for His seeming delays.

'She reckoned Him faithful who had promised'. The Lord Jesus once exhorted His followers, 'Have faith in God'.¹³ James Hudson Taylor, the great missionary pioneer of the 19th century, maintained that our Lord's words should rather be translated, 'Hold on to the faithfulness of God'. Indeed, those words became the motto of his life and work.

In his autobiography, *"To China... with Love"*, Mr Hudson Taylor records an incident which happened more or less exactly 250 years ago.

I quote, '*On January 6, 1858, only one solitary 'cash' remained – (a 'cash' being) the twentieth part of a penny. But, though tested, we looked to God once again to manifest His gracious care. Enough provision was found in the house to supply a meagre breakfast; after which, having neither food for the rest of the day, nor money to buy any, we could only go to Him who was able to supply all our need ...*

After prayer and deliberation we thought that perhaps we ought to dispose of something we possessed in order to meet our immediate requirements ... We had, indeed, one article – an iron stove – which we knew the Chinese would readily purchase; although we much regretted the necessity of parting with it. At length, however, we set out ... and after a walk of some distance came to the river ... but ... the bridge had been carried away during the preceding night, and the river was only passable by means of a ferry, the fare for which was two 'cash' for each person. As we only possessed one 'cash' between us, our only course was to return On reaching home, we ... again cried to the Lord ...

While we were still upon our knees a letter arrived from England containing a remittance. And this timely supply not only met the immediate and urgent need of the day ... Although during subsequent years our faith was often severely tried, He ever proved faithful to His promise'.

The Bible doesn't mince matters. It tells us plainly that we have all sinned against God – whoever we are. But it also promises us, 'If we confess our sins, He (the God we have sinned against) is *faithful* and just to forgive us our sins'.¹⁴ God has said it, and because He has said it, He will do it – for, as Sarah proved so long ago, He is 'faithful who promised'. It is then for each of us to turn to Him in repentance, to place our trust alone in the Lord Jesus and His death for us, to receive His promised forgiveness, and thereafter, in the words of Hudson Taylor, to 'hold onto the faithfulness of God'.

Endnotes

¹ This is the only occasion in scripture of which I know where a woman's name is changed by the Lord.

² This is the first time that the mother of the seed promised to Abraham is named.

³ Gen. 17. 1, 15-19. Isaac was the child of promise. More was said about him in the Bible before his birth than about any other person, with the exception only of our Lord Jesus. And there are many points of correspondence between Isaac and the Saviour. For example :

a. Isaac was the promised seed and son, Gen. 17. 16; so also was Christ, Gen. 3. 15; Isa. 7. 14.

b. A lengthy interval occurred between God's first promise to Abraham and its realization. So also there was a lengthy interval between God's promise to send the Saviour and the fulfillment of that promise.

c. When Isaac's birth was announced, his mother-to-be asked, 'Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?', Gen. 18. 13), to which the answer was returned, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' When Gabriel made known to Mary that she was to be the mother of the Saviour, she asked, 'How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?', Luke 1. 34, to which the answer was given, 'With God nothing shall be impossible', Luke 1. 37.

d. Isaac's name was specified before he was born—'And you shall call his name Isaac', Gen. 17. 19). Compare the words of the angel to Joseph before the Lord Jesus was born—"And you shall call his name Jesus', Matt. 1. 21.

e. Isaac's birth took place at God's appointed time – 'at the set time', Gen. 21. 2. So also in connection with the Lord Jesus we read that, 'when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman', Gal. 4. 4.

f. Isaac's birth required a miracle to bring it about; so also did the birth of the Lord Jesus.

g. The name Isaac (given unto him by Abraham, and not Sarah, Gen. 21. 3), which means 'Laughter', carried special significance. So too the name given to our Lord by Joseph.

h. All was given to Isaac by his father, Gen. 24. 36; 25. 5. So too the Father gave all things into our Lord's hands, John 3. 35.

⁴ Gen. 18. 1, 9-15. Abraham had earlier laughed, Gen. 17. 17, but that was in wonder and happy amazement at a promise which seemed too good to be true. God had then told him to name his son Isaac – 'Laughter'. But Sarah's laughter was not that of happy amazement but of unbelief and doubt. Later, however, the nature of her laughter would change. For, following Isaac's birth, her sceptical laughter was transformed into pure joy – 'Sarah said, God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me', Gen. 21. 6.

⁵ Heb. 11. 11. God reckoned Abraham righteous, Gen. 15. 6; Sarah reckoned God faithful, Heb. 11. 11.

⁶ Gen. 21. 8.

⁷ 'The second time that the Lord revealed Himself as *El Shaddai* (God Almighty) was under circumstances very similar to those found in Genesis 17. 1 and context. "And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padanaram, and blessed him. And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name; and He called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins", Gen. 35. 9-11. It will be noted that when God revealed Himself as *the Almighty* to Abram, He changed his name from Abram to Abraham; so here, He changes the name of his grandson from Jacob to Israel. To Abram God said, "And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and *will multiply thee exceedingly*...and thou shalt be a father of many nations" (Gen. 17. 2, 4); to Jacob He said, "Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a *company of nations* shall be of thee" (Gen. 35. 11). Again, we are told that God "appeared" to Abram (Gen. 17. 1), literally "was seen to Abram," and here in Genesis 35. 9 the same word is used—this is the more striking for, excepting Genesis 12. 7, these are the only occasions in Genesis where we read of God "appearing" to the patriarchs, as though to emphasize the importance of this Divine title. Finally, in noting the parallelisms between Genesis 17 and 35, we may observe that at the close of this Divine interview we read "And He left off talking with him, and God *went up* from Abraham" (Gen. 17. 22) and in Genesis 35. 13 we are told, "And God *went up* from him in the place where He talked with him". [Extracted from A. W. Pink's 'Gleanings in Genesis']

⁸ 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?', literally. No indeed! 'Ah, Lord God. Behold, you made the heaven and the earth by your great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard ('too wonderful') for you', Jer. 32. 17.

⁹ Sarah looked beyond the promise to the One who had promised.

¹⁰ Gen. 21. 1-2.

¹¹ Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old, Gen. 21. 5, but Abraham had left Haran for Canaan when he was 75 years old, Gen. 12. 4.

¹² That, as is often said, 'man's extremity was God's opportunity'. God will turn nature upside down rather than fail to perform His word. In this case, Abraham 'considered his own body now dead ... and the deadness of Sarah's womb ... he wavered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God', Rom. 4. 19-20. There is considerable textual evidence that Paul wrote 'considered', rather than, with the KJV, 'considered not'. The KJV implies that Abraham *disregarded* the physical circumstances, which, humanly speaking, made it impossible for God's promise to be fulfilled. But many older Greek manuscripts imply that Abraham deliberately took account of his age and circumstances, and, in spite of this careful consideration, exercised faith in God and His word.

¹³ Mark 11. 22.

¹⁴ 1 John 1. 9.