

FROM A WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

Genesis 18, 21

We've been looking at the life of Abram these Sunday mornings and I thought this week we would try to see things from a different perspective, through the eyes of his wife, Sarai. I'm not sure how successful I'll be, whether I'll be able to get in touch with my feminine side.

Most of the story is told from Abram's perspective but all the way through Sarai is there. When Abram's name is changed to Abraham, Sarai's name is changed as well, and she becomes Sarah, meaning 'princess'. We need to try and appreciate what these new names meant to Abram and Sarai. Abram – exalted father, 'Big Daddy' – became Abraham, father of many.

I haven't been able to find a meaning for Sarai, but the new name, Sarah, means princess. I'm not sure that Sarai would have appreciated it if she'd been called 'Big Mamma', but Princess – I think she'd like that.

Like Abram Sarai began life in the city of Ur. Genesis chapter 20 verse 12 reveals that she was actually Abram's half sister. They had the same father but different mothers. She and Abram fell in love and got married and when Abram heard the call to leave his homeland and go to a place which God would show him, Sarai went with him.

The first thing I want you to notice about her is

1. Her obedience

It's this that's highlighted in the New Testament when Peter addresses wives in his first letter. In chapter 3 he says, 'Wives, ... be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.' What's going to influence an unsympathetic husband? Constant nagging? No. Quiet purity and reverence towards God and a submissive attitude towards your husband.

Peter goes on, 'Your beauty should not come from outward adornment ... it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.'

Just having a husband is not a very fashionable idea these days, let alone submitting to your husband and obeying him. Of course we've had Women's Liberation, haven't we. Women used to do all the washing, cooking, cleaning, and looking after the kids. Then came Women's Liberation. Now they go out to work – and do all the washing, cooking, cleaning, and looking after the kids. I'm reminded of that expression: Do me a favour; don't do me any more favours.

Wives, be submissive to your husbands. Of course, it doesn't say, 'Husbands, subjugate your wives.' It says, 'Love your wives; be considerate as you live with your wives.' This doesn't mean that men are always right. That is abundantly clear, even from the life of such a great man as Abram. But Sarai showed her faith in God by supporting and encouraging and submitting to her husband.

2. Her deliverance

Sarai was drop-dead gorgeous and Abram had this constant fear that he would be killed because of his wife. So on more than one occasion he got into hot water by saying that she was his sister and hiding the fact that they were married. Of course, strictly speaking, it wasn't a lie; it just wasn't the whole truth. We're not told how Sarai felt about this deception but I suspect she wasn't very happy about it. However, she

was a dutiful wife and she went along with it because Abram asked her to.

There are two occasions recorded for us when Sarai was taken into the harem of a powerful king because she was so beautiful and her 'brother' didn't seem to object. The first occasion is in chapter 12 when they were in Egypt. The other occasion is in chapter 20 in Gerar where Abimelech was king. On both occasions Sarai was in danger, both physical danger and moral danger. Chapter 20 verses 1 to 3 gives us an insight into how the LORD dealt with the situation.

'Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."' "

Just imagine it. Poor old Abimelech. That wasn't a dream; it was a nightmare. God came to him and said, in effect, 'Abimelech, you're a dead man.'

There are two aspects to this deliverance. Firstly, there is the personal aspect, the thoroughly distasteful situation which Sarai faced. God rescued her, and did it more than once. But there's a wider implication to all this. Sarai was the one God had chosen to be the mother of his people Israel. It was from her and her line that the Messiah would one day come.

A far greater deliverance was at stake, the deliverance that would come through Jesus Christ, our deliverance from sin and death.

It's easy for us to get trapped into the small details of our own lives, the issues that are of greatest importance to us personally, but there are wider issues, the vast eternal purposes of God in this world and beyond our time, in history and eternity.

God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near:
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

3. Her impatience

When we look back to Sarai's first appearance, in chapter 11 verse 30, the very first thing we are told about her is that 'Sarai was barren; she had no children.' That must have been a terrible trial to her. In those days, in that culture, it was a great stigma.

We're not told how Abram reacted. No doubt it was a big disappointment to him too, but the LORD had appeared to him and promised that he would be the father of a great nation. Above everything else Abram was a man of faith and I've no doubt he encouraged Sarai to share the vision, and trust in God.

The prize for the most insensitive man in the Bible must go to Elkanah, the husband of Hannah, who was also childless for many years. He couldn't understand why she took it so badly and why she kept on crying. He said, 'Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?' Abram wasn't that crass. But it must have been unnerving for Sarai to be married to a man whose name meant 'exalted father' when it became increasingly obvious that she couldn't have children.

Was it her fault? Was her faith lacking somehow? Was there some sin that she wasn't confessing? As time went by they were increasingly prosperous and comfortable but that was no compensation for the emptiness she felt inside her.

Chapter 16 records a significant development in her life (verses 1-4a).

'Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."' "

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.'

It wasn't that Sarai had lost faith in God. But she was confused and felt it was time to take the situation into her own hands. Unfortunately it didn't turn out as she had hoped. Verse 4b

'When [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me." "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.'

What a mess. Sarai and Hagar were at odds. Abram was caught in the middle. She said, 'It's your fault.' Abram said, 'Don't blame me; she's your servant.' Sarai was so mad she took it out on Hagar and was so harsh that Hagar ran away.

It all stemmed from impatience. The prophet Habakkuk was given a vision, a revelation of God's purpose but nothing seemed to be happening. God's word to him was, 'Though it linger, wait for it.' The Bible has a lot to say about patience, about waiting. It's an evidence of faith, and yet somehow we always seem to think that not waiting is the evidence of faith, diving in, taking the bull by the horns. Do you trust God enough to wait?

4. Her reassurance

When Hagar ran away the LORD caught up with her and told her to go back and submit to her mistress. So she did. She went back and had the baby, Ishmael, and he grew up as Abram's son. But God appeared to Abram and repeated his promises. He changed his name to Abraham and he changed Sarai's name to Sarah – princess.

God said, 'I will bless her [Sarah] and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.'

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac.'" (Genesis 17:16–19.) The name Isaac means 'he laughs'.

Later three men visited Abraham and through them the LORD spoke again. Genesis 18 verses 9 to 15. "'Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. There, in the tent," he said. Then the LORD 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 old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Most commentaries are written by men and here's a quote from one of them. 'Sarah's laughter denoted continuing disbelief, not the startled surprise Abraham had exhibited.' Do you see a bit of chauvinism there? Abraham laughs; that's startled surprise. Sarah laughs. That's disbelief. I'm afraid I don't swallow that. They both laughed and in both cases it was because they just couldn't see how having a child now was possible.

But God gave them a reassurance: Is anything too hard for the LORD?

5. Her intolerance

There's a final twist to Sarah's story in chapter 21. Isaac had been born and was around three or four years old. Verses 8 to 10: 'The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."'

I don't think intolerance is too strong a word for that. Abraham was not pleased. Verse 11 goes on: 'The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.' Now who was right? Verse 12: 'God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."'

Did I hear that right? 'Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.' The headship of a husband does not mean that he is always right. The submission of a wife does not mean that she is never right. On this occasion Sarah was right and Abraham was wrong, and God told him to listen to his wife.

It was an issue of intolerance. In our society today intolerance is just about the only vice that won't be tolerated, but the Bible teaches that there are things that are wrong that must not be tolerated.

Some of you are engineers. You're used to working with tolerances. But you know that if machinery is going to work you cannot afford to go outside those tolerances. When it comes to inaccuracy you have to be intolerant. What's true in the mechanical world is true in the spiritual world. You can't afford to be careless about morality, integrity, and purity. The fact is that women are often more sensitive about these things than men. It may not be good for our pride but it's true, and we must have the grace to recognise it.

In days to come the prophet Isaiah was to call the people of Israel back to God with these words (Isaiah 51:1-2). '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.'