

GOD PORTRAYS MORE WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER ONE

SARAH

(Genesis 11-23)

SARAH IS FIRST MENTIONED in the Bible in the genealogy of Shem, one of Noah's sons. She was included there because she was married to Abram, and at that time her name was Sarai. Chapter 11, verse 30 says, "**But Sarai was barren; she had no child.**" This was considered a great reproach to any woman, and doubtless Sarai suffered many cruel taunts on that account.

Abram and Sarai lived with their relatives in Ur of the Chaldees. Joshua tells us they were heathen and served idols (Joshua 24:2). We are not informed how Abram first learned to know God. No doubt the many evils practiced around him in that heathen land distressed him.

The apostle Paul when addressing an audience of heathen in Athens spoke of the yearning in men's hearts after the true God, and how He was found of them (Acts 17:27). The Lord Jesus said: "**Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled**" (Matthew 5:6).

We do know from Genesis 12:1-3 that God appeared in person to Abram. Peter refers to this in his sermon in Acts 7 and speaks of the Lord as the God of glory. He bade Abram get out of his country and from his kindred and go into a land that He would show him. You may be sure; Abram was subject to much criticism when he announced his intention to obey God's call. But it is interesting to note that Sarai raised no objections though it must have cost her something to leave her friends and old home.

Abram's father, Terah, apparently could not bear to part with his son and daughter-in-law. He admired Abram's courageous consistency in his new spiritual life and decided to go with them. So they journeyed together taking also Abram's nephew, Lot, with them until they reached Haran in Canaan where the father insisted that they remain. It was not until Terah died that Abram was free to fully obey the Lord. It is a serious thing for those who half-heartedly follow the Lord to retard others who are eager to be out and out for Him.

As Abram and Sarai journeyed, he often repeated to her God's exact promises. "**I will make of thee . . . I will bless thee . . . thou shalt be a blessing.**" When these three statements are true in anyone's life, the result is an outstanding Christian.

We so often plan our own lives, never consulting God about what He would make of them, then ask Him to bless our plans. Most of us are eager to be blessed—but not so keen on being a blessing to others. Let us ask ourselves, Am I so yielded to the Lord that I will let Him make what He will of me?

“So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken to him.” He went out with his wife and Lot, and all the substance he had gathered and the souls they had gotten in Haran. **“And Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran”** (12:4). He recognized God’s claims on himself, his family, and all that he had. Not a hoof would be left behind. He pitched his tent, and he builded an altar unto the Lord who appeared unto him. In his busy daily life this wealthy man took time for communion with the living Lord he served.

A day of testing came to this good man and his wife. Testings bring out into clear light our intimate weaknesses as well as our strength. The greatest of God’s saints were men of like passions as ourselves, and the Lord never gilds sin in His heroes. There was but One who did no sin, knew no sin, in Him was no sin.

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there (12:10). Isaiah wrote long afterward: **“Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!”** (Isaiah 31:1).

In Scripture *Egypt is a type of the world*. Often under the stress and appeal of material advantage, the Christian is lured from **“the place of the altar”** to the **“far country”** only to be **“stripped”** and come back empty with a wounded conscience and a sense of lost time. They only accumulate wood, hay, and stubble, to which they themselves will be glad to put a match.

When Abram drew near his destination, he was not so sure of the wisdom of his ways, for we read: **“And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee”** (12:11-13).

So they agreed to tell a half-truth. When we have misgivings, let us stop. If in doubt, don’t. When we resort to duplicity and conniving, we are in slippery places.

The Bible tells us that Sarai was very fair. She must have been strikingly beautiful because the Egyptians noticed it; the princes who saw her commended her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into Pharaoh’s house. It was a mercy to Sarai that the custom of training and behavior in the harem of the king took six or eight months before the marriage could take place. Abram was entertained and given lavish presents of sheep and cattle because of Sarai, yet every bleat of the sheep and lowing of the oxen would remind him that he had really sold his wife. This must have made him very unhappy all the time he was in Egypt.

God waited a long time for a confession of wrongdoing from Sarai and Abram. No one can have either joy or confidence in prayer when he is knowingly sinning. Unjudged sin hardens the conscience. The greatest saint can fall. No wonder the Lord said to His disciples, **“Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.”**

God considers marriage sacred. Therefore, the Lord would not allow Pharaoh to touch Sarai, but permitted a dreadful epidemic to break out.

Pharaoh had more sense than some Christians have in time of trouble; he examined himself to see if there was any moral reason for this plague. It would seem as if Sarai had confessed that she was in the wrong place when she learned about the sufferings in the king’s household and realized that God had sent it. Perhaps she could not bear to have anyone else afflicted because of her. Pharaoh sent for her husband, and the heathen king proved to be more righteous than Abram, who was rebuked and taught a lesson in holiness.

Abram never could forget the reproachful look the king gave him when he confessed his dishonesty, duplicity, cowardice, and folly. It is indeed a humiliating day for any child of God when he deserves and receives the just rebuke from the world for his inconsistency which brings reproach on the name of the Lord. The king was magnanimous; instead of imprisoning them both and taking away all the dowry he had given them, Pharaoh, who had no desire for revenge, sent Abram away, his wife, and all that they had.

And Abram went up out of Egypt to Bethel, unto the place of the altar. While in Egypt he was away from the Lord— without the altar. We are counted as dead and lost all the time we are in the far country. There can be no joy until we come back to the place of the altar. But thank God, **“He restoreth my soul.”** God received his returning, repenting prodigal and went on gladly with him again. Communion with the Father is normal Christian living.

There were days in Abram’s and Sarai’s life when there was domestic difficulty with his nephew Lot over their possessions. Abram felt that any family disruption would be a bad testimony to the Canaanite and Perizzite who dwelt in the land.

“And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren” (13:8).

So he generously told Lot to take his choice saying: **“If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left”** (13:9)

Eventually Lot found himself mayor of Sodom, vexing [distressing] his soul from day to day with the filthy conversation and wicked deeds of the people. For material gain and an office in Sodom he sacrificed sweet fellowship with his Uncle Abram and Aunt Sarai.

But war broke out, four kings fought against five, and Sodom was involved. Lot and his family was carried away captive by the victorious armies. How he longed, now that he was in difficulty, for the help and prayers of Abram! Word was brought to his uncle of Lot’s predicament.

Did Sarai say, “Let Lot learn his lesson? You surely are not going out against four kings with our handful of servants? What are three hundred and eighteen men against four armies? Are we going to be left unprotected?” No, she had confidence in her husband and was not panicky in a crisis. Peter says that we are daughters of Sarai as long as we do well and are not filled with any amazement, that is, if you permit nothing whatever to terrify you.

Women who trust in God have spiritual poise.

After Abram’s fine, generous rescue of Lot, fears seized him, perhaps fears of reprisals and inadequacy, but the Lord came to Abram in a vision saying: “**Fear not Abram. I am thy shield . . . I will stand between you and the enemy . . . I am thy exceeding great reward . . . You refused the king of Sodom’s reward. You have me.**” We frequently are not satisfied “**seeing him who is invisible,**” we love “**the arm of flesh.**” How patient God is with human desires!

Abram said, “**What wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?**” God took Abram out and asked him to count the stars if he could, saying unto him, “**So shall thy seed be.**” Abram believed the Lord, and the Scriptures tell us that God counted it to him for righteousness (15:6). Sarai must have often asked Abram, “Tell me again what God said.”

Ten years passed and yet Sarai had no son. She grew impatient for the time when she could embrace her own child. With God there is a “**fullness of time,**” and He is never before His time or a moment behind, as witness the stars in their courses. But the test of the patience of faith for Sarai was most trying. Inordinate desires produce irregular behavior. Our wishes should be kept subject to God’s precepts. If we would accept the Lord’s hand in our lives, we would be saved much grief! Many a Christian girl thinks she must be married. She cannot wait for God’s choice, but links herself with an unsaved man only to reap grief for both of them through the years.

Abram and Sarai had brought to Canaan, Hagar, a slave girl from Egypt. *We seldom go to the world without bringing back things that later cause us trouble.* So at the end of the ten years Sarai gave Hagar to her husband to be his wife. But sin never “stays put.” The reaping is a harvest. When Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised or belittled in her eyes.

Proverbs 30:21 makes this comment: “**For three things the earth is disquieted, and for four which it cannot bear; for a servant when he reigneth; and a fool when he is filled with meat; for an odious woman when she is married; and an handmaid that is heir to the mistress.**”

No doubt Hagar took occasion to flaunt herself and speak slightly of Abram’s wife—who was wealth and lovely but childless. Her insolence became intolerable. Poor Sarai had to own that she originated the sin but blamed Abram for consenting to it. The fruit of sin is bitter—the harvest, galling! A moment’s sin brings a lifetime of regret. The sorrow that we bring on ourselves is the worst.

When Sarai complained to her husband, Abram replied, “**Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it please thee**” (16:6).

He recognized Sarai as mistress of the home and would not interfere in her department. He did not think of Hagar as his wife. She was just Sarai's maid. When Sarah dealt harshly with her, she ran away. She wouldn't stand it. An arrogant spirit cannot brook any reproof. We dislike the consequences of our sin and the trouble it brings; we frequently think, if I were just somewhere else, things would be different. We change our environment but we take ourselves and our own bad dispositions with us only to discover our sin finds us out. Like a dog, it is always at our heels. We cannot run away from our conscience.

Sarai thought she was well rid of Hagar. Hagar thought she had escaped from Sarai, but neither one was beyond the reach of the Lord nor rid of her sin. And the Lord must be faced. This is the first mention of "**the angel of the Lord**" in Scripture, when he was seeking a naughty, runaway Egyptian slave. How tender are the words: "**And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur**" (16:7).

The result of running away is to find ourselves in a wilderness. But the Good Shepherd pursues us. Sad to say, we will not yield to Him until we are at the end of our resources. But when we meet Him and face issues with Him, we find the place in the wilderness is "**by a fountain.**"

And he said, "**Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go?**" (16:8).

The Lord asks us very pertinent questions. Immediately the angel let her know that he knew her name and was interested in her. He also reminded her, to check her pride, that *she was still Sarai's maid, not Abram's wife*. God never alters the sanctity of marriage, and He rebukes every violation of it. How similar this dealing with Hagar is to Christ's dealings with the woman at the well in John 4! Nothing is hid from His eyes. Hagar did not lie to the angel. She said, "**I flee from the face of my mistress.**"

And the angel of the Lord said unto her, "**Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands**" (16:9).

Grace sought Hagar, but righteousness sent her back to submit. This is a hard lesson to the flesh, but we must all learn it.

When we have done wrong, we must return and confess, like the prodigal son, saying, "**Father, I have sinned.**" There is no peace of conscience until we do. Even of Christ it is said, "**He learned obedience,**" submission to the will of Another.

The angel let Hagar know his compassion for her, and he not only counseled but comforted her. He told her the Lord cared about her expecting her baby, and even told her what to call the child, reminding her that He was a witness to any injustice even toward a slave and that He hears the cry of the least of the children of men. "**Call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction**" (16:11).

Did the Lord also remind Hagar of prenatal influence?

She was intolerable with others, impatient of service and restraint, and her child would be one whose hand was against every man and, as a consequence, every man's hand against him. Turbulent spirits have troublesome lives. Those imperious and vexatious to others are repaid in kind. What we sow we reap. **"And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren"** (16:12). We often sigh over the children born after the flesh, the Ishmaels, how difficult they are to live with!

The ensuing years were full of varied experiences. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord again appeared to him. God then changed his name to Abraham and his wife's to Sarah. He renewed His promise of a child for Sarah.

"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?" (17:17).

He laughed and was incredulous, and said, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (17:18). How often has this cry for the child after the flesh gone up from a parent's heart! Then God told him: ***"I have my purposes for Ishmael but he is not the child of promise. Sarah's child is the child of the covenant."***

The Lord returned later with two angels to restate the fulfillment of the promise to Sarah. She too laughed as she thought that naturally it was impossible at their time of life to have a baby, but the Lord asked Abraham: **"Is anything 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"** (18:14).

God's appointed time is not always ours. Upon this assurance Abraham **"staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; hut was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform"** (Romans 4:20, 21).

How strange it was, even though Abraham and Sarah were anticipating the fulfillment of God's promises, they sinned again! What sorrow these lapses bring in our Christian life! They had been publicly rebuked by the king of Egypt, and thought they would never be guilty again of bringing such reproach on the Lord. But in chapter 20 at Gerar they exposed themselves to the same snare. If God severely punishes one who ignorantly takes another man's wife, what of those who intentionally do so? God reproved a worldly king for flirtations with another man's wife, how much more will He rebuke His own children who behave unbecomingly and indiscreetly?

What excuse can they give? Abraham said: **"Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place"** (20:11).

Where was the fear of the Lord in his own heart? When we do wrong, how often we think and claim to be better than others around us. Shame on us! All that Abimelech could think of when he looked at Abraham was that he and Sarah had deceived him. What is the world's opinion of my life as a Christian?

Do we have to announce ourselves? Is our walk unlike our profession? Will God give up Abraham and Sarah because of failure again? No, but He allowed them as He will us to be humiliated and rebuked by the world. How embarrassed they must have felt as they stood before Abimelech when he said to Sarah: **“Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes”** (20:16)! Tradition says he presented her with a veil. In other words, he told her not to look for admiration from other men. It is still a good rule for a wife to keep her caresses for her own husband.

So let us ever pray, “Keep us, Lord, O keep us cleaving to Thyself.” We will have much to thank God for His restraining hand and preventing mercies, as when God told Abimelech, **“I also withheld thee from sinning against me”** (20:6).

After Abraham’s humiliating confession, he prayed God for Abimelech, and the prayer of a restored, erring saint was heard and answered.

Do the words, **“Thus she was reproved,”** imply that Abraham and Sarah at last judged and were done with their old pact? Someone has suggested that while this pact remained, God refused to give them a child, but now, because of a right relationship between each other, **“The Lord visited Sarah”** (21:1). The Lord did as He had spoken, at the set time. Inconsistence and sin often hinder God from blessing us.

Abraham acknowledged that God had a claim on the little children by circumcising Isaac when he was eight day old. God desires the Christian household, from parent to infant, associated with Himself.

“And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had borne unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight” (21:8-11).

Recent excavated tablets of Abraham’s time reveal that it was the law of the land that a mistress could give her slave girl to her husband, but the child born would not share in the inheritance.

Bitter is the fruit of our own way, and irritating are the thorns of our own planting. Ishmael was jealous. Like his disrespectful mother, he insulted, taunted, and mocked others. The flesh despises the things of the spirit and would persecute it. What are we to do with that which is born of the flesh—indulge it?—no, mortify it. Cast it out so that which is of God may grow. Every gardener practices this with his roses and fruit trees; he constantly keeps cutting off what the old root would produce that the new excellent life of the graft may bring forth the good fruit As we walk with God, we are truly conscious of how much pruning we need every day.

Though Hagar and Ishmael were expelled from Abraham’s tents, they were not beyond God’s care. We may have to eat the bitter fruit of our own ways, yet God pursues us by His grace and is tender over us and would comfort us.

There seems to have been no resistance on the part of Hagar and Ishmael. They recognized it as a right thing. When they came to the end of all their resources, after the water was all gone, and they were at their wits' end, then God met them again. Will it always take a wilderness to make us face the Lord? She cast the lad under a shrub and left him, and petulantly cried, "**Let me not see the death of the child**" (21:16).

Where was the motherly comfort for her child in his extreme need? "**Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands** [the marks of Christ's devotion to us He still wears on His hands in the glory]; **thy walls are continually before me**"—that is, He is not only interested in me, but in all within my house (Isaiah 49:15, 16).

Hagar sat and wept, but did not pray for Ishmael. If Ishmael's mother would not pray for him, he prayed for himself. Did God hear the voice of a disrespectful, mocking lad? Yes, where there was repentance God came at once at his cry.

Sometimes one hears another say that the Lord will not hear the prayers of the unsaved. How they would limit the Lord! Ishmael was no angelic boy, yet here is recorded, "**And God heard the voice of the lad**" (21:17). And the Lord himself said, "**Suffer the little children to come unto me.**" It is wrong for anyone to hinder the little ones from coming to the Lord—the earlier the better! Again God had pertinent questions to ask the impertinent Hagar. "**What aileth thee, Hagar?**" God cares—it matters to Him about you whatever your plight, deservedly or undeservedly—you are God's concern. Fear not! When God says, "**Fear not,**" it is His pledge to undertake for us, and we will find:

The clouds, we so much dread
Are big with mercy,
And will break with blessings
On our heads.

"**God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is**" (21: 17)—yes, "**When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up**" (Psalm 27:10).

Hagar's rebellious grief blinded her to the provision God had made for their need. "**And God opened her eyes and she saw a well**" (21:19). Again there was a fountain of water when she met God. She saved herself and the lad by obedience. And God was with the lad, and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer.

The household of Abraham after this progressed normally for thirty years or more. Isaac grew up under the love and happy influence of devoted parents. They trained him in the fear of the Lord, urging him not to live for this world only but in view of eternity, as Hebrews 11 teaches us.

Sarah and Isaac were very devoted to each other, and the day Sarah took ill was a sad day for her son. Evidently his father was away and she had gone to be "**with the Lord**" before Abraham reached home.

“And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.”

This is the only time we read of Abraham weeping. Hadn't he Isaac? Oh, yes, but there were many years of his life that Isaac had not shared. There were trials, joys, failures, restorations that Sarah had experienced with him. These links are not easily broken. God's men of faith were not lacking in feeling or beyond human emotion and affection.

Our Lord had natural affection. **“Now the Lord loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus.”** **“Jesus wept.”** He was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. He did not put on a stoical front as if He were beyond and above human sympathy. We often read that **“he was moved with compassion.”**

“And Abraham stood up before his dead,” and sought a fitting burying place for Sarah. Even her body was precious He spoke of her as **“my dead,”** and he paid handsomely for a sepulcher with trees around it. Our Lord, too, was buried by loving hands in a garden with sweet spices an hundred pound weight.

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15), and how appropriate it is to see them honorably laid away to await the glad shout from our Lord's own lips, **“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away”** (Song of Solomon 2:13)!

Isaiah would have us recall the life of Abraham and Sarai that we may take heart and encouragement from God's dealing and care in their lives: **“Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him”** (Isaiah 51:1, 2).

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