

Faith And The Christian Fight, (Part 8)

Abraham Concluded--Sarah's Faith

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 24-Nov-07; Tape #856

We will begin this sermon by turning to Hebrews 11:8-10. I will remind you that prior to the recent Feast of Tabernacles I was proceeding through a series drawn from Hebrews the 11th chapter, and I gave a couple of sermons regarding Abraham's faith, but had not concluded regarding him. However, during the Feast I touched on Abraham frequently during the sermons involving Eden, the Two Trees, the Tabernacle, and the Temple.

Many, many more sermons could be given on Abraham's faith. His example is so outstanding it is no wonder at all to me why he is named "the father of the faithful." I want to conclude regarding him, today, by reminding us of a few of the overall principles that determined how he lived and their practical application to you and me.

Hebrews 11:8-10 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

The previous sermon in this series began by establishing that separation and joining occur as a result of God's calling, as shown through Abraham's calling. Abraham was separated from the world, from Babylon as an outright pagan, but he was also joined to the Kingdom of God as an alien in a foreign land. More importantly, he was spiritually separated from carnality and death, but joined to Godly spirituality and life. Thus, it is with us through our calling, though we do not have to physically leave the land of our birth. Our spiritual calling before God and our spiritual state before God undergo radical changes because of this calling. One's life is never again the same. What *wemust* understand is that these changes place us under obligations to be directly responsible, directly answerable and accountable to the requirements Jesus Christ places for us to live by, and under.

Briefly stated, the essence of these requirements are encapsulated in the statement given in Hebrews 10:38, where it says, "Now the just shall live by faith." There is *the* major general obligation that is placed upon us. We *must* live by faith. The statement is a strong imperative that can be understood in two ways. First, as a command with an implied "or else" sense to it, and secondly, a statement of fact, carrying an implied, "this is why they do what they do" sense.

This brings us back to Abraham's response and example of God's calling of him. He immediately separated himself from Ur and Haran, and once in the Promised Land, he continued living by

faith. He did not merely intellectually accept certain spiritual concepts, he actively trusted them in daily life, showing this by the conduct of his life. His faith was not merely a point of discussion. He put his beliefs into action, and that is what separated him from everybody else. In Hebrews 11, Paul chose to illustrate this by using the alien state and pilgrim metaphor that appears in verse 13.

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

On the outside, to the casual observer of Abraham's life, he lived as if he did not even belong in the community and the nation in which he and the group that gathered around him lived. Doing this establishes a major general pattern for his faithful children to follow with their lives. This pattern reveals that, in every sense of the word, Abraham was a pilgrim regardless of where he lived in the Promised Land, regardless of his economic circumstances.

He purchased no land. He never even built a house, and the Bible shows very little social interaction with others outside of his family and that group which gathered around him. Except for one league of peace made with his nearest neighbor, he made no alliances, nor took any part in the politics of the nation, nor with any of their religions. Abraham lived this way one hundred years. Verse 9 shows that Isaac and Jacob, who lived even more tumultuous lives, also strove to maintain the same pattern of life. They were carved out of the same block of wood we might say.

Hebrews 11:9 By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

Now as far as we are able to determine, God does not require any of us that we separate that far. God clearly established a general pattern, though, for us. All of this is shown that we might see that virtually his entire life was enclosed within his living by faith, containing his relationship with God. He was truly in the world, but once he was separated from Ur, he was never again a part of it. He did not cultivate its friendship. He used it as necessity required, but he was very guarded lest in some way he abused his privileges with God. We learned from this the disposition of his heart.

I think all of you are familiar with Matthew 12: 34, where it says "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." There is a corollary to that truth, and it is this: "Out of the abundance of the heart the body acts." So we learn from Abraham his disposition, that Abraham did virtually everything to give God evidence that his loyalty was to God and the purpose God was working out to create in his life.

I think that one of the more interesting aspects to Abraham is that he built no house. A tent does not even have a foundation. This is especially intriguing when one considers where his

spiritual journey began—in Ur of the Chaldees. That was the very heart of the most highly advanced civilization on earth at the time, and all of this is shown that we might see that virtually his entire life was enclosed within his living by faith, containing his relationship with God. He truly *was in* the world, but not of it.

To you and me a house offers a place of security, a sense of being, a defense, and a comfort. Taken to an extreme, only a home can be like a badge worn to show the community who and what one is and what one has accomplished in life. Notice a contrast with Abraham regarding this.

Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward.

Now with Abraham, God was his security, his badge and comfort, and the object of his life. This is especially interesting when seeing the word "reward" following the occurrence at the end of chapter 14. That was the meeting with Melchizedek and the bread and the wine situation. During that meeting he was offered by the kings of the valley, there, a very nice reward for the thing that he had worked to their favor, so that they got back their things. What did Abraham do? He rejected it. Right after that God came to him in a vision, and it appears to have been the same night. What did God do? By that vision He confirmed to Abram that he had done the right thing in rejecting that reward from the world. God said, "I am your reward," and that is the way it must be seen by us. This was saying that Abraham truly looked upon God as his provider and his protector for everything in his life. What faith that man had!

In Genesis 12: 8 we are given a little bit more insight of those things that guided Abraham and Sarah. This is when they were just coming into the land.

Genesis 12:8 And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west and Hai on the east: and there he built an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD.

Genesis 13:3-4 And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai; Unto the place of the altar, which he had make there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

Genesis 13:18 Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD.

The tent, combined with the altar and prayer, speaks of the focus of Abraham's and Sarah's life, and it becomes very plain that Abraham and Sarah did not lust after material things. The record shows that they had largely overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. They had their affection firmly set on things above, not on things of the earth. They were

honest. They lived in the world with its cultures, but they did everything they could to protect the relationship with God and not build a relationship with the world.

Hebrews 11:14-16 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called *their* God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

The word "for" beginning verse 14 tells us why Abraham and Sarah did as they did. Abraham and Sarah did not go off by themselves and build a city as Cain did, or even as Abraham's brother Nahor did, because he too built a city. Abraham and Sarah lived by faith in God's Word. Their mind's eye was on the Kingdom of God. Interestingly, verse 9 says that they looked for a city built by God that had foundations. Always though, their life was as a pilgrim.

In our time, brethren, we want so much for Christ to return, and we put a great deal of stress on ourselves that helps to make us weary, wishing all the time that it were over. Abraham did this for one hundred years. They were looking toward the end of the road. He persevered. He did it patiently.

Now think about yourself in this situation, where the end is coming toward us in almost, it seems, at light speed. Brethren, we cannot hasten what we have absolutely no control over. God wants us to focus on getting ready for His kingdom. Is that too boring? Does it require too much patience, too much perseverance? It is our lot that God has set before us, to live in a tumultuous time in which there are things to fear right around every corner.

Evelyn and I heard of one today. We were watching CNN Headline News at 12 o'clock, and they were saying something that I did not know before, but now it is common knowledge. Big Brother can find anybody who has a cell phone on him. Even though the cell phone is off, there is a chip in there that is working, sending a signal to the satellite up there, and they know where you are within one block at any time.

This is the kind of world we live in, and of course now people are concerned about how the government will use this information. Right now, the courts have the government blocked, and the only ones who can really do this, who have access to it, are AT&T, BellSouth, etc., etc. They have the equipment to do it, but in order to get the information the government has to get permission from the courts. It is just another one of those stressful things to put pressure on us. *Where* are we going to live? *How* are we going to live? Is it going to be like Abraham and Sarah, or are we going to allow this world to wear away at us?

We will read again Hebrews 11:13.

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

Hebrews 11, in an overall sense, is showing faith in God as a right and true motivating influence for the conduct of anyone's life, but that faith inspired Abel to seek justification through Christ's blood. It inspired Enoch to walk with God, and it inspired Noah to truly seek God for salvation in perilous times like we live in. He built an ark which symbolizes the work in the salvation process.

Before we leave Abraham, I want to draw attention to three elements regarding Abraham that are set forth in Hebrews 11. They are set forth as examples for each of us to pattern our life after.

First: Even though circumstances delayed him, his personal response when originally called when he was in Ur, was trusting, decisive, and deeply committed. He was convicted.

Second: Hebrews 11 draws attention to showing his determined focus was so committed that he truly lived life as a pilgrim. He permitted himself no room in his life to sink down to materialism, or friendship roots with the world.

Three: The spotlight of his life held steadily on the hope of the future, on things above, on the things of the Kingdom of God.

These three guided and helped determine all the little things, that is, the works accomplished on a day-to-day basis so faithfully that he set a pattern among men, and thus earned the names "the father of the faithful, the friend of God."

Now this finishes what I intended to cover regarding Abraham, who is probably the most important human example for us to keep in mind as an overall guide to life. He is, of course, nowhere near as important as Jesus Christ. In fact, he is not even on the map from that perspective.

But at the same time, I believe it would be wrong for us to ignore Sarah, who shared this awesome adventure with him, more intimately involved than any other person. There is not anywhere near the information that we can draw upon as exists for Abraham, but what is there is very much worth looking into. So we are going to take a look at Sarah. She was quite a gal.

I Peter 3:6 Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters you are, as long as you do well, and are not afraid with any amazement [or terror].

As far as I am concerned, this puts Sarah on the same lofty perch as Abraham, and even as he is designated by God as the father of the faithful, Sarah is the mother of the faithful. This tells me that even though there is nowhere near as much reporting on her, she was Abraham's perfect complement as a faithful family's leadership. That faithful family, I hope, includes us now. So, even as Abraham is the father, establishing the pattern for men and women, Abraham had a complement. Her name is Sarah, and she is the pattern for both men and women as well. Now, how did she do this?

The context in I Peter 3 gives us some guidelines.

I Peter 3:2-5 While they behold your chaste conduct coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands:

Let us just notice the overall guidelines that Peter gives here.

number 1: These women were morally pure and their behavior was respectful of God.

number 2: They gave concentration on that which is internal; that is, of the spirit rather than that which is cosmetically external. They had a gentle and peaceful disposition.

number 3: They put their trust and hope in God, and that is why *fear* (terror) was kept under control and did not dominate their lives. You men have got to understand that women have a lot more to fear than a man does—even her own husband. Remember, she is the weaker sex, and that is why this is mentioned there.

In verse 6 Peter draws on Sarah as being the prime example. What we have to do then to understand Sarah's leadership more precisely is to look at what it says of Abraham, and then understand that she shared those experiences with him with the same general mind. Her personal perspectives and feelings were undoubtedly different from his, but her faith, too, was in God.

We are now going to go to Luke 1:5-6. This is not written about Sarah and Abraham, but it does serve as a means of understanding the way God looked at them as a couple.

Luke 1:5-6 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

This parallels the relationship that Abraham and Sarah had with God.

Hebrews 11:11 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

Sarah and Elizabeth were faithful too. What we are beginning to do here is separate Sarah and

Abraham, somewhat. We are beginning to see God is pointing out that Sarah, on her own, was faithful to God. I want you to notice that when the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews 11:11, he inserted the third word "also." "Through faith~~h~~/so Sarah." I want you to notice how all these other verses read when introducing another character.

Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered unto God

"By faith Abel. . ." It does not say, "By faith Abel also." That word "also" is missing.

Hebrews 11:5 By faith Enoch

"By faith Enoch." It does not have that word "also."

Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah,

Again, the word "also" is missing.

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham,

The word "also" is missing."

Hebrews 11:20 By faith Isaac

Again, the word "also" is missing.

Hebrews 11:21 By faith Jacob,

The word "also" is missing.

Hebrews 11:22 By faith Joseph,

Again, the word "also" is missing.

Do you get the point? Paul inserted that word "also" for a very definite reason to turn our attention to *her* specifically in a way different from all the men. Some modern versions will use the word "even" rather than the word "also," but regardless, the word is inserted by Paul to draw our attention to the fact that Sarah had faith of her own. Do you understand that?

Here is the first husband and wife God is dealing with in this chapter, and God neatly separates the two when it comes to faith. She had to have faith on her own. She could not borrow faith from Abraham. Neither could Abraham borrow faith from her. She had it on her own. If I could put it this way, in terms of the spirit, she stood on her own feet.

In other words, it is saying that she was not merely submissive in following Abraham through whatever happened to him in his relationship with God, fully sharing them with him, but at the same time was submissive and faithful toward God on the basis of her own God-given faith, not Abraham's. She, too, was called from Ur. She, too, made the pilgrimage wherever it took them. She too experienced the severe testing of God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

What this does is spotlight two important elements of God's order of things important for us to understand. Even though a woman is in subjection to her husband in this life's physical aspects, she stands on her own in its spiritual aspects. Each woman receives her own individual calling, her own gift of faith in God, her own forgiveness and her own gifts for her place of work and accompaniment to the spiritual body of Jesus Christ; and very importantly, she is judged and rewarded on the merit of her use of *her* gifts within the framework of what God requires of her, not her husband.

Let us go to Galatians 3: 26-29 and notice a neat separation; a distinction that God makes here:

Galatians 3:26-29 For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you be Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

In God's family, there is true equality without prejudice before God. God's judgments do not depend on racial, ethnic, or gender factors, whatever. Salvation is an individual matter. Judgment is not communal or group.

Galatians 4:21-26 Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which genders to bondage, which is Hagar. For this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answers to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.

This puts everything regarding Sarah's standing in its proper spiritual position. And even as Abraham's fatherhood is transferred to God, our spiritual Father, so Sarah's motherhood also transfers to her spiritual reality—Jerusalem above, the spiritual mother of us all.

Three times in this brief span of those verses Paul refers to Sarah as being a free woman. When this designation is combined with what Jesus taught in John 8 about being free, we understand that Paul is saying that she was a truly spiritually-minded moral woman of the highest order among humans. Her faith and her salvation were not inextricably tied to Abraham, however. It

does not mean that she was perfect any more than Abraham was perfect, but it does mean that their lives, both in conduct and attitude, pleased God greatly.

Since God directly called Abraham, "My friend," in Isaiah 41:6, I believe that this elevated title also applies to Sarah, who was "one in the flesh and the faith" with him.

Isaiah 41:8 But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.

That is quite a designation.

I stated that Sarah was not perfect. Tied directly to this instruction is something regarding her that helps us grasp a reason why she is on such an elevated plane right there with Abraham. This is going to give us reason to hope in God's patient mercy for salvation.

Hebrews 11:11-12 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

The key for us here is that through faith Sarah received strength to conceive Isaac. In other words, through faith she was supernaturally healed.

When Paul wrote this, he placed the word "herself" in the emphatic position in order to draw attention to it. Paul is pointing out to us that Sarah did not borrow faith from Abraham regarding this incident. She stood on her own and received the blessing on the strength *of her* faith in God, not Abraham's.

I want you to consider this because there were considerable physical obstacles here. I know you know what they were, but I will repeat them. First of all, Sarah was ninety years old. Secondly, her womb was dead—never having given birth to any child—and even though people lived to longer lives than we do today, she was well past the age of conceiving.

In addition to that, Abraham (as alluded to in Romans 4), too, was dead (meaning sexually). He was impotent. Now keep those things in mind, because everything by nature—meaning everything you could literally see, what she knew of physical things—was working against her acceptance of God's promise. The only thing that was working *for* her was her faith, and she was not really convicted, yet.

Let us go back to that incident in Genesis 18.

Genesis 18:9-15 And they [the three visitors] said unto him, Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah your wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which

was behind Him [*behind* God, the one who was speaking]. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the LORD said unto Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, No; but you did laugh.

So here we have the infamous "laughing" circumstance. Sarah's laugh was one of doubting and distrust. Now immediately following God's pronouncement, she drew attention to her doubt, in verse 12, when she laughed within herself and said those things we just read. Her laugh was not one of joyful anticipation of such a great blessing, and God, who had His back turned to her, immediately discerned and corrected her, reminding her with His question, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? She then added insult to injury by denying that she laughed a laugh of doubt. She was not only doubting, but now she was fearing as well.

It is indeed a shameful thing to sin in this manner, but she was adding iniquity to iniquity, as it says in another place in the Bible, by covering it up with the lie that she had not laughed. There are a couple of lessons, here, for us.

We are going to look at Hebrews 4:11-13. Paul was speaking to Christians.

Hebrews 4:11-13 Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. [We just witnessed a time when Sarah did not believe.] For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

This startling statement is intended by God to be not merely instruction, but also a fairly strong threat as well. Children can put things over on their parents because, humanly, we lack the powers to be aware of everywhere at all times. But with God, our spiritual Father, there is no such limitation. So consider this. In the narrative of Genesis 18, it gives no indication of any external manifestation of Sarah's doubt. He read her mind without even looking at her.

Lesson number 1: God's eyes, as it were, see us as though we are naked inside and out, and we must accept and live with the fact that we cannot hide behind excuse or pretense.

We are only fooling ourselves if we think, like little children, that somehow we have put it over on God.

Now Lesson 2 is also hopeful and comforting. We are going to go back to Luke 1, once again, to the subject of Zachariah.

Luke 1:18-20 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto you, and to show you these glad tidings. And, behold, you shall be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believed not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

God's judgment of Sarah was different from the judgment of Zachariah. Other than a verbal correction by Him of her, there was no punishment. Now was God playing favorites? No. There is no partiality with God. I want you to recall though that Zachariah was not merely a righteous man, he was also a priest and, therefore, a leader of the community. God discerned the source of Zachariah's response, and it did not measure up to His standard for Zachariah.

Remember the principle that Christ gave us regarding God's judgment. "To whom much is given, the much more is required." Sarah's reaction was generated by weakness. Her laugh was not a harsh antagonistic scorn, and God immediately discerned this, and He judged accordingly. And though Zachariah was not antagonistic, his skepticism really counted heavily against him. He should have known better.

Lesson number 2: When God judges us He takes into consideration everything He knows about us, including our weaknesses, and He judges accordingly. There is comfort and hope in this.

Lesson number 3: Sarah did not "get it" until the promise was repeated. This, too, has a measure of hope within it. God is aware of our weaknesses, that we do not always "get it" the first time around, or the second, or the third, or the fourth. Who knows how many excuses He allows us. He is pretty patient, but be careful because even God's patience wears thin.

II Corinthians 5:6-9 Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, while we are at home i