

Text: Heb. 11:11-12

Title: "By faith Sarah had a child"

Time: 4/17/16 am

Place: NBBC

Intro - There is something overwhelming about very large numbers. Have you ever asked yourself the question, "I wonder how many . . . ?" I like to take my dog for walks in the sand pit behind our house, and as I come to the crest of the first hill and look over the landscape full of pine trees and forest before me, I have found myself wondering, "How many leaves am I looking at right now?" And, "What if I include all the pine needles?" "How many leaves and pine needles are there in the world today?"

I don't know the answer to these questions, but our omniscient Creator does, and the thought that He does is an overwhelming thought. How many leaves have fallen since I began this message world-wide? The calculation has to be adjusted for that. The knowledge of our Almighty, unchangeable God is greater than even these overwhelming numbers.

Our text refers to a fulfilled promise that involved some overwhelming numbers (v. 12). Neither the stars of heaven nor the sand on the seashore have been counted. God knows the numbers, and that thought is a bit overwhelming.

But there is something even more remarkable to our author in this passage than the size of these numbers, and that is the faith of a wife named Sarah, a would-be mother. As exciting as thoughts about numbering the stars or grains of sand or leaves can be, what really excites and inspires our author in these verses is the grandeur of Sarah's faith.

That God fulfilled this promise about Abraham and Sarah's descendants has strengthened the faith of God's people throughout their history. The promise was first given to Abraham after he offered Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:17). The same promise is repeated to their son Isaac a few chapters later (26:4).

When God wanted to destroy Israel for their idolatry before the golden calf, it was the fulfillment of this promise that Moses relied upon as he asked for God's mercy, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven" (Exod. 32:13).

Our passage tells us that what Moses remembered in prayer by faith in that time of crisis, Sarah had believed long before it came about. By faith, Sarah had a child, and many more children after that. I want us to notice three things about this woman's remarkable and victorious faith this morning.

I. Sarah's faith struggled with reasons not to believe (v. 11a, "when she was past age").

Ill: I enjoyed taking in a bit of the Masters golf tournament last weekend. I did not see much of it, but did manage to catch an hour before choir practice on Sunday. A newcomer was in the mix whose name is Smylie Kaufman. Smylie is a great golfer - he came in second in the tournament - but he has an even better name. Smylie's brother's name is Luckie, so you have Smylie and Luckie Kaufman. Clearly, Smylie and Luckie's mom and dad have a sense of humor.

Appl: Well, Abraham and Sarah had that same sense of humor. They named their newborn son *Isaac*, which means *laughter*. When Abraham heard that he and Sarah would have a child, he laughed (Gen. 17:17). When Sarah heard the news, she laughed and then denied laughing (Gen. 18:12, 15). When the child was born, everyone had a reason to laugh with joy (Gen. 21:6). Simply put, the reasons not to believe God's promise made that promise seem laughable. But there is a sense in which laughing at God's promises is not funny.

Were we to dig a bit deeper into the faith of Abraham and Sarah in the promise of a son in the pages of Genesis, we would find there a faith-struggle with unbelief and disobedience that was actually quite tragic. In chapter 16 we have the birth of Ishmael from Abraham and Hagar, and today we have national security professionals occupied every day with the consequences of that disobedient unbelief, for Ishmael is the father of the Arab people who have always hated the Jews and their allies.

In chapter 20 Abraham and Sarah visit Abimelech during that critical year of promise just before Isaac was to be born, and God brings judgment on Abimelech's house for the half-truth that Abraham told. God gave specific warning about this specific promise when it came to the nation's disobedience in Deut. 28:62, "And ye shall be left few in number, whereas ye were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because thou wouldest not obey the voice of the Lord thy God."

You see, where you have the faith of Abraham and Sarah, you have obedience and blessing. But where you have the unbelief of Abraham and Sarah, you have disobedience and severe consequences.

The life of every believer involves this struggle between faith and unbelief. Sarah's faith struggled with reasons not to believe and not to obey the Lord. Ours will too.

I am reminded of the prayer of the father of the son who was possessed with demons, "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). That man had come to the end of his rope in his personal struggle with the kind of unbelief and disobedience that ultimately caused a son to be raised as demon-possessed. Jesus promised him, "All things are possible to him that believeth."

This prayer was his response to that promise. It needs to be ours as well. Have we struggled with unbelief and disobedience and felt the curse of their consequences long enough? Are we ready to shed some tears and pray the prayer, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief"? Sarah's faith struggled with reasons not to believe. Has ours?

II. Sarah's faith found victory in the one reason to believe (v. 11b, "because she judged him faithful who had promised").

III: You may remember that we read this morning that Sarah laughed within herself when she heard that she at 90 years of age and Abraham at 100 years of age were to have a son (Gen. 18:12). You ever do that? We all have, right? Something funny occurs to us just at the wrong time. We try not to laugh, but we cannot help it. This happened in choir practice last Sunday afternoon. Poor Jeff was doing his best to conduct us energetically through a song, and the soprano section could not stop laughing. They were not laughing at him, but they were supposed to be singing, not laughing. They could not help themselves.

Appl: Sarah did even better than that. She kept the laugh inside, but that did not matter, because she was dealing with the pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God, and the Lord knew her heart. He pointed out her laughter, and then he asked her a very good question, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14).

What is the answer to that question? It is, "No, God can do anything but fail." There is nothing too difficult for the Lord, and it turns out this was the only reason Sarah had for believing the promise of the Lord that she and Abraham would have a child. I believe that our text here in Hebrews tells us that when Sarah heard that question, she got the answer right. She concluded, "No. God can do anything but fail." "She judged Him faithful who had promised." Have you done that? Have you come to the settled realization that God can do anything but fail you? Have you judged Him faithful who promised?

So often we depend on other reasons to believe. Our trust is placed in man rather than in God. Can God bless and use a small faithful church like ours today? Can we really survive singing the Psalms rather than more popular country ballads on Sunday morning? Is it possible that souls can be saved and disciples be made in these days of powerful media and dark paganism?

Jesus promised, "I will build my church," and what is the one reason we can believe this to be true? "Is there anything too difficult for the Lord?" "No. He who promised is faithful." We need to understand that this is the question that matters, and we need that answer to this question. We must judge Him who promised to be faithful.

III. The struggle and victory of Sarah's faith blessed those who came after her (v. 12).

Ill: We return to those overwhelming numbers here again. The promise is that the descendants of Abraham and Sarah would be innumerable, like the stars of heaven and like the sand on the seashore. We know that this is true today, that the promise has been fulfilled, for no one knows the number of these descendants – they have been too many to count. In fact, the Bible tells us precisely when the fulfillment of this promise occurred. Deut. 10:22, "Thy fathers went down into Egypt with threescore and ten persons; and now the Lord thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude." It was fulfilled during the days of sojourning and slavery in Egypt.

Appl: So it was not fulfilled in the days of Abraham and Sarah, was it? No it was not. I believe that this is what our author intends to convey in the phrase we have here, *and him as good as dead*. The phrase is similar to one that Paul uses in Rom. 4:19 to speak of the deadness of Abraham's body and Sarah's womb when it comes to the ability to procreate, although Abraham and Sarah were still very much alive. The phrase here, however, very simply says *after he had been put to death*. The verse is not about when Isaac was born; it is about when the innumerable nation was born. The blessing of this fulfilled promise that Abraham and Sarah believed actually came long after they and their son Isaac were gone from this earth. The struggle and victory of Sarah's faith blessed those who came after her.

Ill: The importance of this truth was pressed home to me last Thursday. My brother, who is a pastor at Grace Church of Mentor, OH, sent me a video production they have done on the history of their church. Grace Church has been

blessed of the Lord. They have constructed multiple million-dollar facilities and have plans for more. They operate a Bible Institute. They have a full pastoral staff with many who attend. They have planted eight other churches besides their own. Each year they fly 100 pastors to Florida for a discipleship conference.

But what blessed me about the video presentation of their history is that they showed some black-and-white footage of what the church was like a generation or two ago. They mentioned the small congregations and honored the faithfulness of those difficult times. They mentioned the faithful pastors who had not seen steady success, but had battled through seasons when it did not seem as though Christ was fulfilling His promise to build His church. Their point was that even in those times, He was.

Appl: We may not see in our day what faithfulness to our calling will do in the work of the Lord. The blessing of that fulfilled promise may not come until we are long passed from this earth. That is how it worked for the faith of Abraham and Sarah, but the Bible is clear that their faith in God's promise was a blessing to those who came after them.

And it is important for us to understand that it was a blessing to us here this morning -we Gentiles saved by faith in Christ are among the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore (Rom. 4:12-16). It is not only those who bear the flesh of Abraham and Sarah, but also the faith of Abraham and Sarah, who are Abraham's descendants.

Conclusion: Do you and I have the saving faith of Abraham in the promise of the Lord? He has promised, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Have

you believed that promise, obeyed it by calling on Him, and been saved? He has promised, "I will build My church." Have you believed that promise, obeyed it by becoming a faithful and active part of this work, and been living in a way that will be a blessing to those who come after you?

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*