

Sarah's Daughters

by Deborah A. Biddle

“For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.”

(1 Peter 3:5-6)

How many times have you read, heard, or been taught the following verses?

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22)

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. (Colossians 3:18)

Women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation. (1 Timothy 2:9)

Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (1 Timothy 2:11)

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. (1 Timothy 2:12)

Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Timothy 2:14)

Admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, and to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed. (Titus 2:4-5)

Have you ever wondered if being a Christian wife were more than a rigid list of do's and don'ts? Do you question whether you can ever measure up? Well, wonder no more! We have a role model in the person of Sarah. Yes, Sarah! The one who obeyed Abraham and called him lord. Yes, she is the one. Sarah was the beautiful wife and half sister of Abraham (Genesis 11:29-31, 20:11-13). She was barren until age ninety (Genesis 11:30), gave Abram her maid, Hagar (Genesis 16:1-3), was promised a son (Genesis 17:15-21), gave birth to Isaac (Genesis 21:1-8) and was responsible for Hagar's and Ishmael's departure (Genesis 21:8-21). Sarah lived to be 127 years old (Genesis 23:1) and is our example of submission (1 Peter 3:6).

You may be saying to yourself, “Great another woman's example to high for me to attain!” Read on. You will see that Sarah is not so different from you and me. She was a woman trying to live a godly life and be a good wife. Isn't that really who we are or at least who we are trying to be?

The book of Genesis documents most of what we know about Sarai (her name was later changed to Sarah). In Genesis 11, we learn that Sarai was in the midst of a journey from Ur to Haran with her husband, Abram and his family. She was also in the process of a struggle with the Near Eastern wife's deepest female social stigma, barrenness. To be without a child at that time in that region was a source of a great shame and disgrace.

Genesis 12 goes on to reveal the covenant God made to Abram and the beginnings of another journey for him and for Sarai. Here, God promised to make Abram a great nation. He promised to bless him, make his name great, make him a blessing, to bless those who bless him, curse those who curse him, and bless all the families of the earth through him. To fulfill this promise, Sarai must have known her role was necessary and crucial. However, soon after the promise was spoken, Abram jeopardized it by going to Egypt, where he passed Sarai off as his sister. Abram feared death because Sarah was "a woman of beautiful countenance" (Genesis 12:11b). So, he asked her to say she was his sister when the Egyptians asked. Pharaoh believed Abram and took Sarai into his harem. Abram tried this deception again in Genesis 20 with Abimelech, King of Gerar.

The Bible does not explicitly say that she agreed. However, she must have gone along with Abraham's story because she *was* taken into Pharaoh's harem, while Abraham was living well in Egypt land acquiring many livestock and many servants. To endure, Sarai must have *really* trusted God to intervene on her behalf. The Bible records that the "Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. . . . So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him [Abram]; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had" (Genesis 12:17,20).

Since Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, ten more years passed. Yet, Sarai remained barren. Still dealing with feelings of inadequacy, Sarah devised her own scheme to have children. She gave her Egyptian maid Hagar to Abraham, a custom according to which Hagar's child would be considered Sarai's (Genesis 16). The plan backfired for when Hagar conceived, she despised Sarai. Sarai was not going to tolerate any further indignities. Therefore, she dealt harshly with Hagar causing her to flee to the desert. The Angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar in the desert and instructed her to return and submit under Sarai's hand.

Years later, when Sarai was too old to bear children, God reaffirmed his promise and changed Sarai's name to Sarah, meaning princess. As with Abraham's name change, Sarah's is symbolic of her special destiny, as the mother of nations from whom kings of people shall come. Upon receiving this news from God, Abraham's response was laughter. Though she denied laughing when God confronted her, Sarah also laughed when she overheard the visitors say that she would bear a son. Finally, in Genesis 21, Sarah bore Abraham a son who God named Isaac, meaning laughter.

Isaac grew and was weaned. In honor of the occasion, Abraham prepared a great feast (Genesis 21). Seeing Hagar's son Ishmael scoffing, Sarah had Hagar and Ishmael sent away. Though Abraham was displeased, God supported Sarah's decision saying to Abraham "Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called" (Genesis 21:12b).

Sarah lived to be 127 years old. At her death, "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her" (Genesis 23:2b). He purchased the cave of Machpelah from the Hittites for her burial place.

Like many wives, Sarah felt pressure to validate her worth. People probably kept whispering, "When is she going to have a baby?" "I wonder what her problem is." "Why hasn't she given her husband any sons?" Imagine trekking across country with family constantly reminding you that you have not accomplished your wifely duty. Imagine your nieces and nephews around as constant reminders that you had not birthed a child. Sarah must have been frustrated and saddened.

Sarah followed her husband from Ur to Haran to Shechem to Bethel to Negev to Egypt, wondering where they would finally live and when they will finally arrive. When Abraham asked her to say she was his sister so that his life would be spared, she must have been hurt, scared, confused, and even angry. I am sure she did not appreciate being treated as a liability because of her beauty. She probably was not feeling very loved or cherished. Yet, she was obedient to her husband.

As I read about Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, I thought she might have been a bit severe. After all, she brought that on herself, didn't she? She "gave her [Hagar] to her husband to be his wife" (Genesis 16:3a). What did she think would happen?

Then I began to see myself in her. I began to think of the many times I have tried to control my circumstances by taking matters into my own hands; by devising the plan and putting it into action. Tired of waiting on God, I have told myself that I can resolve the matter quicker, if I just do it myself.

When I see how God continued to execute His plan for her and for us, I marvel at His sovereignty. He continued to use Sarah despite her controlling nature. Instead of remaining steadfast in prayer, she let Hagar and Ishmael affect her ability to trust God's plan and wait for Him to bring it to pass. Sarah had authority issues, just as we do. Just like us, she struggled to wait on and submit to God. His desire is that we yield, give ourselves over to His authority; submit ourselves to one another in the fear of God; and as wives, submit to our own husbands. When we do, we will see God's hand guiding us and guiding our circumstances. We will see Him intervening on our behalf. We will not only begin to see ourselves as the "holy women in former times", we will begin to actualize their behavior and realize submission in our marriages.

1 Peter 3:5 says that these holy women in former times “adorned themselves”. Their adornment was not merely that of costly clothes, fancy hair-dos, spa treatments, or fine jewelry. It was the ornament of chaste and modest conduct accompanied with respect and reverence. More than the clothes, shoes, and purses we own; more than the expensive jewelry, homes, and cars we buy; more than our self-assuredness, capabilities, accomplishments, and paychecks; and even more than our pretty faces and beautiful bodies, we must adorn ourselves “with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3:4).

If our desire is to please God as wives and to be precious in His sight, we must answer the clarion call to submit. We have to trust God and *just do it*. Like Sarah, we can judge Him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11). Obedience and honor demonstrated Sarah’s submission to Abraham; those remain as two essential aspects of submission for those who would be daughters of Sarah. She called Abraham lord (Genesis 18:12). Are you able to respect the man God has given you as husband? Sarah honored her husband enough to show it in thought, word, and deed, even in unthinkable situations. We can follow Sarah’s example by respecting our husband’s authority and esteeming him highly in what we say and do.

We need not fear what will happen when we surrender to our husband’s authority. We know that “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. Nevertheless, he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). Therefore, we need not fear losing our personalities, individuality, independence, worth, or dignity by submitting to our husbands. God is in control. We must completely trust in Him and have no fear or terror. We are called to “do good” by embracing God’s will for wives, thereby demonstrating our trust in Him.

Whose daughter are you? I have not attained Sarah’s status. I am, however, following her example. I believe I can make it. I am Sarah’s daughter striving to obey my Abraham, calling him lord and doing good without fear or terror.