

Living by Faith

Lesson 5: Faith That Waits on the Promise: Sarah and the Patriarchs -- Hebrews 11:11-16

There is a particular kind of waiting that wears a person down. It is not the waiting in a line at the store, where you know the cashier will reach you in a few minutes. It is the waiting that stretches on for years, where the thing you long for never seems to come, where you begin to wonder if you misheard, if you hoped for too much, if God forgot. Sarah knew that waiting. For decades she carried a promise in her heart that her body kept contradicting. Year after year she watched the calendar turn, felt herself grow older, and still the cradle stood empty. If you have ever held a promise that seemed long overdue, you are standing on ground Sarah knew well.

And yet here she is, written into the great honor roll of faith. 'By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.' That last phrase is the hinge of her whole story. She did not consider her own body, which was as good as dead. She did not consider the long years of disappointment. She considered Him, the One who had spoken. When she finally laughed, it was not the bitter laugh of unbelief but the wondering laugh of a woman holding a miracle. From one couple, both well past the age of bearing children, God brought descendants as countless as the stars overhead and the sand along the shore.

But the passage does not stop with one cradle filled. It widens out to a whole company of believers, Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and all who walked with them, and it tells us something startling. 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.' They died still waiting. The promise was not yet in their hands. And rather than grow bitter, they confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth, people whose true home lay somewhere they had not yet arrived. They were not disappointed pilgrims. They were people who had glimpsed a better country and could not stop walking toward it.

This is one of the most tender and bracing pictures in all of Scripture, and it speaks directly to the way most of us actually live. We too hold promises that have not yet come true. We too bury people we love before the great day arrives. We too feel, more often than we admit, like strangers in a world that is not finally our home. This lesson invites us to learn from Sarah and the patriarchs how to wait well, how to trust a God whose timing is not ours, and how to keep our hearts fixed on the city He has prepared. For of such people the text says something almost too good to believe: God is not ashamed to be called their God.

Group Discussion: Our culture is built for speed and instant results, and it tends to treat waiting as wasted time. How does that shape the way Christians today respond when God's promises

seem delayed, and what might the church recover by paying attention to Sarah and the patriarchs?

Personal Reflection: Think of a promise of God you have been waiting on for a long time, perhaps for years. How has the waiting affected your trust in Him, and what would it look like for you, like Sarah, to consider Him faithful who has promised?

Read Hebrews 11:11–16

Study Questions

1. Verse 11 says that Sarah ‘received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.’ What does it mean to ‘consider him faithful,’ and why does the writer locate the source of her faith in God’s character rather than in her own ability?
2. Sarah waited decades for a promise that her own body seemed to contradict. Where in your life are you waiting on something God has promised, and how is that waiting testing your confidence in Him?
3. Verse 12 says that from Abraham, ‘as good as dead,’ came descendants ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’ What does it teach us about God that He brings such abundant life out of human weakness and impossibility (compare Romans 4:18–21)?
4. Can you recall a time when God worked in a situation that felt hopeless or ‘as good as dead’ to you? What did that experience teach you about His power and His timing?

5. Verse 13 says, 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.' What does it mean to die in faith without yet receiving the promise, and how does this reframe what a successful life of faith actually looks like?
6. The patriarchs 'greeted from afar' promises they would not see fulfilled in their lifetimes. What would it mean for you to greet God's promises with joy even now, before you see them fulfilled?
7. In verse 13 these believers 'acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.' What does it mean for a Christian to live as a stranger and exile, and how should this identity shape the way we hold the things of this world (compare 1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 3:20)?
8. Where do you feel most at home in this world, and where do you sense the pull to put down deeper roots here than a sojourner should? What is one way you could loosen your grip on the temporary and reach for the eternal?
9. Verses 14 to 16 say that these believers were seeking a homeland, 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one,' and therefore 'God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.' What does this passage teach about the believer's true home, about God's unfailing faithfulness to keep His promises across generations, and about the eternal inheritance and resurrection hope that await those who die in faith? How does this heavenly hope sustain us when promises are delayed and loved ones die before the great day comes?

10. Looking back over Hebrews 11:11–16 as a whole, where is Jesus calling you to wait on Him with greater trust and to live more fully with your heart set on the heavenly city? What is one concrete way He is forming patient, hopeful faith in you this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 4:18–21, Abraham hoping against hope and growing strong in faith, fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised; Genesis 18:9–14, the promise of Isaac and the question, is anything too hard for the Lord; 1 Peter 2:11, the call to live as sojourners and exiles who keep themselves from what wars against the soul; Philippians 3:20–21, our citizenship is in heaven, from which we await a Savior who will transform our lowly bodies; Hebrews 11:39–40, the faithful of old did not receive the promise apart from us, for God provided something better.