

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

(Hebrews 11:11-12)

I was visiting a patient in a single room of the heart unit of a large city hospital, he was not one of my members

- But his minister asked me to visit as the hospital was a regional centre and he was quite a way from home
- When I arrived, there were already two other visitors, family members who had made the journey
- We were having quite a serious conversation when a lady that I thought was from the Caribbean arrived
- She was a tall, elegant lady, who had come to clean the bathroom – I said to her, cheerily
- ‘I am glad to see you because we were just about to sing and I was counting on you to be the choir’
- ‘What are you singing?’ she asked. Thinking she was Caribbean I said, ‘Standing on the promises’
- She replied that she knew that one but still disappeared into the bathroom to carry on with her work
- But when she emerged she joined with me, the patient and two visitors in singing the old Gospel song
- This lovely lady was a believer too, not from the Caribbean but from South Africa – a good memory

‘Standing on the promises of God’ – it’s the kind of thing that Christians readily sing but what does it mean?

- It means that our lives must be founded on what God has said – on his promises
- My parents were given a ‘Promise Box’ by an elderly Christian – this was a box of small paper scrolls
- On each of the paper scrolls was a positive Bible text – but I do not believe this is really a good idea
- It is like living the Christian life by the fortune cookie method – guidance through a random saying
- It is the equivalent of a man who had visited his wife in hospital
- When he returned home he decided to open the Bible at random to see what God was saying
- And looked up Genesis 23:2, ‘And Sarah died at Hebron in the land of Canaan’

The story of the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 continues with Abraham's wife, Sarah

- For a more detailed understanding of the story it is necessary to look at Genesis, but not for a moment
- The part of the text that caught my eye was, 'she considered him faithful who had made the promise'
- And that to me contains an important point that I had not previously seen – you may have, of course
- The point is this, Sarah's faith was her comment on God's faithfulness (cf. Rom. 4:19-21)

Over the years, I have tended to keep my cars for a long time, the last one I kept for eight years

- The one before that I kept for 13 years – but it is the one I kept for eight years that I am thinking about
- When I bought it, the salesman said to me, 'and it comes with our own garage's six-month guarantee'
- To be honest, I was not really taking a lot of notice – I had bought a car before with a six-month guarantee
- And the guarantee, with all its exclusions and small print, was not worth the paper that it was written on
- After having the car for five months, I had to take it to the garage, they confirmed it needed a new clutch
- When I called to collect it, the service manager said, it's all done under your guarantee, nothing to pay
- I have never been to any other garage since – because they were as good as their word
- And my faith in them is a comment on their faithfulness to their promise

The great promise that God made to Abraham was that he would be the father of a great nation

- That his name would be great and all nations of the earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:1-2)
- But in later life, when Abraham still had no son and heir, God promised that his descendants would be
- As numerous as the stars of the heavens
- Abraham believed the LORD and he credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6)
- But to be the father of a great nation, a mother was also required - Abraham's wife, Sarah

I HER FAITH IN HIS FAITHFULNESS

It is surprising to find Sarah spoken of as an example of faith, but her part was as important as Abraham's

- Originally Sarai (Gen. 11:29) her name was changed to Sarah (princess) when she received the promise
- That she would bear a son and become the mother of nations and kings (Gen. 17:15, 16)
- Even in the normal years of child-bearing, Sarah could not have children – but long after this
- God promised that she would bear a child – no wonder Sarah laughed (Gen. 18:9 ff.)
- On an ordinary human level, there was no hope that the aged couple would have children
- But there was hope because God had made a promise that it would be so and he is faithful
- Sarah's initial response, to laugh at the idea that she would have a child in her old age
- Was scarcely improved by her suggestion that Abraham should father a child through her maidservant
- The result was not only the birth of Ishmael but also jealousy and enmity (Gen. 16:1-16)
- Nevertheless Sarah became a woman of faith coming to the conviction that God would honour his word
- Faith in the faithfulness of God is the foundation stone of the people of God

The writer to the Hebrews immediately switches back to Abraham as father of the people of God

- The one person of faith is contrasted with his innumerable descendants
- The promise to one who was as good as dead (in terms of being able to father a child)
- Is exceeded only by the one who died and rose again
- God promised, Abraham believed, and Sarah too – and were ancestors to a multitude, too many to count
- Just as the spiritual seed of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, if gathered in a crowd, are too many to count
- A sermon you are not going to hear was just about the faithfulness of God, the faith of his people
- And the fulfilment of his promises – we could probably have said 'amen' and gone home happily
- But that is not enough for me and I don't want it to be enough for you either

II OUR FAITH IN HIS FAITHFULNESS

There are some people, whether they are old-fashioned Christians with their promise boxes

- Or rather more trendy Christians with their particular ideas
- Who, quite wrongly in my opinion, suggest that all the promises in the Bible are for us today
- So, they might say, ‘Abraham and Sarah could not have children – not least because Sarah was infertile
- God was powerful to intervene, God wants to bless this young couple with a child’
- Conclusion: If they don’t have a child it is because they do not have enough faith
- Not only is that conclusion very cruel but it is unbiblical and dishonouring to God
- Not every promise in the Bible is for us today - some are specific promises for specific people/times
- There are also conditional promises (that often begin with the word ‘if’)
- And there are some promises that may be fulfilled spiritually now, and physically later (if at all)
- And the crucial question is, ‘is it possible to tell the difference?’ probably not by random selection

A general promise is one given to every believer in every age – ‘the peace of God

- which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 4:7)
- General but conditional promises are also given to us: ‘If we confess our sins,
- He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:9)

But there are other promises in the Bible that from the context we must interpret as being specific

- They were promises for the people or for an individual at that time
- This is not to say that God treats people in different ages and time differently (dispensationalism)
- But that the promise to Abraham was for Abraham and not for me

III MY FAITH IN HIS FAITHFULNESS

I think I am probably part of a minority within the contemporary church so I had better express this carefully

- I can only explain this in the simplest possible terms – so it will not answer every side issue
- I believe that there is some general revelation of God's character and purpose in creation (Psalm 19:1)
- I believe that the Bible as we have it, in the Old and New Testament is God's word and he speaks to us
- I believe that Jesus is supreme way in which God has spoken to us (Hebrews 1:2)
- And this is tied up with the Bible because the Bible is the record of God speaking to us in Jesus
- I believe that the Holy Spirit works through people to communicate God's word to us today
- The primary way in which the Holy Spirit does that is by illuminating the Bible text
- This can be done through private reading, or the public proclamation of the Bible text
- It can be done informally, in home groups or conversation, or formally by preaching or devotional writing
- All that is expressed positively and I think all evangelical or Bible-believing Christians accept that

There is no doubt that the Christian faith is intended both to be personal and something we share together

- Consequently, I am sometimes asked, 'what is my vision for the church?'
- And, of course, I could ask myself, 'what is my vision for me?'
- Almost needless to say to people who know me, I think those are the wrong questions to ask
- The questions to ask are 'what is God's vision for the church?' and 'what is God's vision for me?'
- If I were to answer those in specific terms then I think that some people might be happily excited
- And I think that there are groups of Christians who believe that they can answer these in specific terms
- And that while they are quite rightly firmly rooted in the Bible – they are adding something to it
- And what they are adding is anointed teaching, or personal prophecy or visions today – but I am not

My conviction is that there are plenty of general or general but conditional promises in the Bible to hold on to

- God's great promise pointing the coming of the Messiah for whom Abraham looked (John 8:56)
- God promising that if we search for him we will find him (Deut. 4:29, Jer. 29:13)
- God has promised that his love will never fail (1 Chron. 16:34)
- God promises if his people humble themselves and pray he will forgive and heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14)
- God promises blessing for all who will delight themselves in his word (Ps 1:1-3)
- God promises salvation to all who trust in his Son (Romans 1:16-17)
- God has promised that all things will work together for good for his children (Romans 8:28)
- God has promised comfort in our trials and troubles 2 Cor. 1:3-4)
- God promised new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) and every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3)
- Jesus promised rest to those who come to him (Matt. 11:28-30), life to those who follow him (Jn. 10:10)
- eternal life to those who trust Him (Jn. 4:14), power to those who serve him (Acts 1:8)
- and to come again and take all those who have faith in him to be with him (Jn. 14:2-3)
- Faith requires an object: the object is God who is faithful. Our faith is our comment on God's faithfulness

Does God speak to us individually, personally and specifically today? I believe he does but how does he do it?

- I think that within the general word we should be looking and listening for the 'timely word'
- whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life
- and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24)
- I think that we do not need other people telling us what God's word for us is, in our specific context
- Instead we need to be searching our Bibles prayerfully, listening to our sermons carefully
- and asking ourselves, what is God saying to me specifically through these more general truths
- one thing we know he is saying: have faith in the God who is faithful