

Daughters of Sarah

TEXT: 1 Peter 3:1–7.

If Abraham is the father of the faithful (Genesis 17:5; Romans 4:11), Sarah is the mother of the faithful (Genesis 17:16; Isaiah 51:2).¹ She was with Abraham, stride for stride, from Ur of the Chaldees to the Promised Land and beyond. When angels appeared, she joined Abraham in extending them hospitality (Genesis 18:6). According to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, the birth of Isaac was as much a result of Sarah's faith as Abraham's: "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11). Like her husband, Sarah was "a faithful original."

In Peter's first epistle, when the apostle turned to the subject of marriage and wanted to illustrate certain principles, the one who came to his mind was Sarah:

For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear (1 Peter 3:5, 6).

The phrase "you have become her children" is a literal rendering of the Greek text. Since the

apostle was addressing women, the "children" referred to would be female children—in other words, daughters. The KJV has "whose daughters ye are" (see also the NIV). In this lesson we will consider the qualities of the "Daughters of Sarah."

We are studying the vital subject of marriage and the home. Never have more books been available regarding marriage and the home, yet never have more people struggled with problem marriages and broken homes. Families need to get back to the one infallible book, the Bible. When our role models for husbands and wives are those whose hearts are set on this world, disaster is inevitable. Peter held up a different kind of model: Sarah.

Our previous lesson was to husbands and fathers. This one contains a challenge for wives and mothers: a challenge to be daughters of Sarah. Through the years I have been privileged to know many daughters of Sarah. This lesson from 1 Peter 3:1–7 is a tribute to all who are already daughters of Sarah—and an exhortation to all women to become more like her. Daughters of Sarah have four characteristics which we will consider.²

²Key principles will be repeated throughout this series: principles such as the man's headship, the woman's submissiveness, and mutual respect. The basic truths concerning these principles cannot be overemphasized, and we learn by repetition. Some of these lessons will reinforce those in the "Christian Man" and "Christian Woman" issues of *Truth for Today* (November and December 1997, January 1998).

¹An outline of this lesson appeared in "A Survey of the New Testament," *Truth for Today* (July 1993), 42.

THEY ARE WILLINGLY SUBMISSIVE (3:1, 2, 4–6)

First, daughters of Sarah are willingly submissive to their husbands—lovingly submissive, even sweetly submissive. Our text begins, “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior³ of their wives” (v. 1).

“Submissive to” is from a military term that means “to place under rank.” “In the same way” refers back a few verses to the example of Jesus, who was willingly submissive to the will of God:

... Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21–23).

As noted in an earlier lesson, submission has nothing to do with one individual’s being inferior while another is superior. (Surely, no one would contend that Jesus was inferior to God.⁴) In our text, Peter emphasized that the husband and the wife are “heirs *together* of the grace of life” (3:7; KJV; emphasis mine); one is no more important than the other. Submission has nothing to do with inferiority or superiority; it has everything to do with respecting the will of God. We are to respect “the will of God that by doing right [we] may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (2:15). Like Jesus, we are to submit to God’s plan, believing that God knows what is best.⁵

Since Peter’s overall theme was persecution, he pictured the situation of a Christian wife married to a non-Christian husband—one who was “disobedient to the word”—but the principle of the submission of the wife has application in all marriages. In Genesis 3 God told the woman, “. . . your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (v. 16). In the New Testament, older women are told to en-

courage the younger women to be “. . . subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored” (Titus 2:5). We have previously seen Paul’s teaching on this subject in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3.⁶

The submission mentioned in 1 Peter 3 is not merely outward, but is the result of a submissive spirit. Verse 2 speaks of “respectful behavior.” Verse 4 refers to “a gentle and quiet spirit.” To illustrate the kind of spirit he was speaking of, Peter turned to Sarah:

For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear (vv. 5, 6).

The term “lord” when applied to a husband may strike us as strange, but that was a term of respect used in Sarah’s day.⁷ When she heard the angel’s promise that she would have a son, she “laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” (Genesis 18:12). In the original text of 1 Peter 3:6, the word translated “calling” is a present participle, indicating continuous action: Sarah continually called Abraham “lord.”

Does this mean that Sarah was spineless, cringing, or mousy?⁸ Does this mean that she had no mind of her own and never expressed her opinion or wishes? Hardly. In *All the Women of the Bible*, Edith Deen said,

The beautiful confidence and true affection existing between Sarah and Abraham are reflected in the authority she had over [their] household during his absence. He recognized her as his equal. She never subjected herself to a lesser role, and Abraham never demanded it.⁹

For an illustration of what Deen was talking about, turn to Genesis 21. Abraham made a great

³The KJV has “conversation.” In King James’ day, “conversation” had a different meaning than it does today. The NKJV has “conduct.”

⁴See Philippians 2:5, 6.

⁵If desired, you can expand the thought that God’s plan for the home is best: The home has only one head, and that head is to be the husband. Here is an illustration: A creature with two heads is a freak, and a creature with no head is dead.

⁶You may want to review the pertinent passages in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3.

⁷“Lord” means “master, one in authority.” In the Scriptures, the word is more commonly applied to God or Jesus but is sometimes used to refer to men of authority (as in Matthew 18:25).

⁸Use whatever terms communicate to your hearers. In my part of the world, we might ask, “Does this mean that she rolled over and played dead, that she invited Abraham to treat her like a doormat?”

⁹Edith Deen, *All the Women of the Bible* (New York: Harper Publishing Co., 1955), 10.

feast on the day that Sarah's son, Isaac, was weaned (v. 8) During the feast, Sarah observed that Ishmael, Abraham's older son by Hagar, was making fun of her son (v. 9), and it greatly upset her. I can see her brown eyes flashing as she told Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac" (v. 10). Abraham was not happy about her request (v. 11); but, encouraged by God, he did as Sarah ordered (vv. 12–14).

Sarah was a strong person, but she was willing for Abraham to be the head of their family; she was willingly and lovingly submissive. No man can be the head of his house without his wife's allowing him to be.¹⁰

Before we leave this matter, let us consider Peter's statement that the behavior of Christian wives may result in winning their non-Christian husbands "without a word" (v. 1). The KJV has "without *the* word" (emphasis mine), which might leave the impression that they can be won without the Word of God. Peter, however, had previously stressed the place of God's Word in the conversion process: "You have in obedience to the truth purified your souls . . . , for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:22, 23). The Word of God is essential to salvation.

The textual evidence favors the rendering "without *a* word." (Emphasis mine.) This may mean "without a word from the wife": in other words, without her nagging her husband to become a Christian. Whether "word" refers to God's Word or the wife's word, the lesson is still the same. Even though, in the past, the husband had refused to listen to the inspired message, hope remained: He might still be won by the respectful behavior of his faithful Christian wife. Someone has said that "Christianity is better demonstrated than debated"; "Life is more eloquent than the lips."

THEY HAVE A QUIET DIGNITY (3:2–5)

Second, daughters of Sarah have a quiet and serene dignity. Verse 2 speaks of the wife's "chaste . . . behavior." The NIV has "the purity

. . . of your lives." Paul referred to the same kind of behavior when he said that young wives should "be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be dishonored" (Titus 2:5).

Peter illustrated what he meant by "chaste behavior" when he told Christian wives to avoid outlandish fashions: "And let not your adornment be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses" (v. 3). Translators added the word "merely" in the NASB to indicate that Peter's words were not intended as an absolute prohibition;¹¹ but the original text literally reads, "Let not [your] adorning be the outward plaiting [or braiding] of hair or putting on gold or clothing with garments."¹²

To understand what Peter was talking about, read Isaiah 3:16–25, which encompasses the apostle's three categories: ostentatious hairdos, jewelry, and clothing. The impressive list of "beauty aids" in Isaiah included these:

. . . anklets, headbands, crescent ornaments, dangling earrings, bracelets, veils, head-dresses, ankle chains, sashes, perfume boxes, amulets, finger rings, nose rings, festal robes, outer tunics, cloaks, money purses, hand mirrors, undergarments, turbans, and veils (vv. 18–23).

Another way to gain insight into Peter's words is to look at a publication featuring photographs of the gala events of the rich and famous and see what many of them are wearing.

Daughters of Sarah are not characterized by a slavish addiction to fashion (Romans 12:2), but rather by a basic modesty and dignity. Their adornment is described in this way:

. . . the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, . . . (vv. 4, 5; see also 1 Timothy 2:9, 10).

This does not mean that daughters of Sarah are totally unconcerned about their appearance. The NASB translators tried to indicate this by

¹⁰A man may dominate his household through coercion and fear, but that is not headship; that is dictatorship.

¹¹See the comments on this verse at the beginning of the next main point.

¹²See the KJV.

rendering verse 3, “And let not your adornment be *merely* external.”¹³ (Emphasis mine.) The name “Sarah” means “princess,” and apparently she was a princess in beauty and in bearing. When Abraham went into Egypt, “the Egyptians saw that the woman [Sarah] was very beautiful” (Genesis 12:14). Edith Deen painted this word picture of Sarah riding in her husband’s caravan:

Though Bible records furnish no further details than the fact that she was “a fair woman to look upon,”¹⁴ we can picture her as wearing a flowing robe blending several rich colors, perhaps the warm reds and azure blue made familiar by the old masters. The drapery of her robe extended to a headdress with a veil that partly hid her face. It is easy to imagine she might have had alluring auburn hair, plaited and coiled in halo effect, exquisite olive skin, red lips and cheeks, deep-set eyes that brightened as she smiled, and a figure both commanding and graceful.¹⁵

I am inclined to agree with Deen’s assessment when I read that when she was almost seventy, men were still pursuing her.¹⁶

If 1 Peter 3:3–5 does not mean that daughters of Sarah are unconcerned about their appearance, then what does it mean? It means that daughters of Sarah are not dependent on the artificial to enhance their character. Instead, their character enhances their appearance. They walk and talk with dignity.

The word “adornment” in verse 3 is translated from the Greek word from which we get “cosmetics.” Daughters of Sarah are made beautiful from “inward” cosmetics which cannot be bought at a store!¹⁷

¹³Early editions of the NASB had “let not your adornment be external *only*.” (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁴Genesis 12:11 (KJV).

¹⁵Deen, 10–11.

¹⁶Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham (Genesis 17:17). Abraham was seventy-five when he departed out of Haran (Genesis 12:4); Sarah would have been sixty-five. Some time later, they went into Egypt, where Pharaoh took Sarah into his house (that is, into his harem) because of her beauty (Genesis 12:11, 14, 15). At that time, she had to be almost seventy years of age, if not older. In a similar incident, Abimelech took Sarah into his harem when she was almost ninety (Genesis 20:2).

¹⁷Some places have “beauty colleges” where men and women learn to be hairdressers and cosmetologists, and where (theoretically) women can go to be “made beautiful.” God’s “beauty college” is described in 1 Peter 3:3–5.

THEY HAVE AN INNER BEAUTY (3:3–6)

Peter’s statements suggest a third characteristic of daughters of Sarah: They have an inner and unfading beauty.

The instruction not to be adorned by “braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses” obviously does not involve an absolute prohibition; otherwise, a woman would be wrong to put on clothes. Rather, the passage has to do with the *emphasis* in the lives of women. Daughters of Sarah *emphasize the inner person* rather than the outer: “Let not your adornment be merely external . . . ; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, . . .” (vv. 3, 4). They understand that “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7b).

Daughters of Sarah also *emphasize pleasing God* as they strive to develop that “gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3:4). Like “the holy women” of old, their hope is in the Lord (v. 5). Like Sarah, they strive to “do what is right” (v. 6).

When a woman’s priorities are spiritual rather than physical, we will see at least two results. One result is implied by the cryptic words at the end of verse 6: “without being frightened by any fear.”¹⁸ Two words are used in this passage for “fear”: The first is translated from the usual Greek word for “to fear.” The second is the noun form of the word that means “to terrify.” The second word refers to a shrinking, shuddering fear that unnerves a person. Literally, the passage speaks of “not fearing any terror.”

This double emphasis is an emphatic way of saying, “If you do as I have instructed, you will not be terrified by *anything*.” Considering Peter’s focus in this letter, he may have been saying, “You will have nothing to fear from persecution.” After all, if the inner person is what concerns us, and not the outer person, what have we to fear from those who can only “kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28)? He may also have been saying, “You will have nothing to fear from your unbelieving husband.”

¹⁸The KJV has “are not afraid with any amazement.” Compare this to Proverbs 3:25.

Application can be made beyond that specific situation. Since daughters of Sarah know that God is with them, they are not consumed by fear—whatever their circumstances. They can echo the words of the psalmist: “The Lord is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Psalm 118:6; see also Psalm 56:4; Hebrews 13:6).

A second result is seen when the priorities of a wife and mother are spiritual rather than physical: She has a beauty that grows within, which time cannot erase, but can only enhance. Someone has said that our two “parents”—“Mother Nature” and “Father Time”—will make sure that we do not stay outwardly beautiful. Lotions, cosmetics, and massages¹⁹ can only do so much; wrinkles and sags are inevitable if we live long enough.

Daughters of Sarah have an inner beauty that has nothing to do with evenness of features and smoothness of skin. Their beauty does not come from outward enhancement. Rather, it comes from the “inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful” (1 Peter 3:3–5a; NIV).

THEY ARE LOVINGLY RESPECTED (3:7)

Finally, our text declares that daughters of Sarah are lovingly respected:²⁰ “You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way,²¹ as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (v. 7).²² Notice the word “likewise”:

¹⁹In some parts of the world, cosmetic surgery (“face-lifts”) could be added to the list.

²⁰Footnote 2 stated that certain themes will be repeated in this series. None will be repeated more than the topic of respect, because I have seen a need for respect. When you adapt this series for your own situation, give thought and prayer to what is needed in your society—and change the lessons accordingly.

²¹The KJV has “dwell with them according to knowledge.” Husbands must get to know their wives *generally* (in other words, learn what the general needs of women are) and *specifically* (get to know their own wives’ personal needs). We husbands will probably never totally understand our wives, but we must try!

²²Some have wondered why Peter’s comments on the responsibility of wives take six verses, while only one verse admonishes husbands. A humorist answered the question by saying, “Because it is six times harder for

The pathway for husbands and wives is the same. Every marriage needs “winsome wives” and “honorable husbands.”

The NASB instructs the husband to “grant her [his wife] honor.” The NIV has “treat them with respect.” Respect is included in the Greek word translated “honor” in the NASB (see also the KJV), but the word includes more than that. When it is used in the previous chapter to speak of Christ as the rejected corner stone, the word is translated “precious” (2:6, 7; NASB, KJV, NIV). As husbands, we must let our wives know how precious they are to us!

Something should be said about the phrase “weaker vessel,” since this may be construed by some as being less than respectful. “Weaker” refers only to physical strength. While exceptions do exist, as a rule the husband is stronger than his wife²³—and Peter used this fact to impress on husbands the need to protect and care for their wives. The word “weaker” does *not* mean “worth less.” When my family lived near Moore, Oklahoma, one of my jobs was to feed the pigs each morning. I used a battered five-gallon bucket for this task. When I was finished, I would toss the bucket twenty or so feet to the general spot where it was kept. Inside the house, my mother had vases. Those vases would never have survived such a tossing. They were “weaker” than that battered, rusty five-gallon bucket. At the same time, they were infinitely more valuable. We husbands should let our wives know how valuable they are to us.

Sarah was respected and loved—and so are her daughters. Like many of her daughters after

wives to get along with their husbands as it is for husbands to get along with their wives!” The actual answer is simple: In this section, Peter was addressing the problem of Christian wives married to non-Christian husbands (vv. 1–6). However, he did not want to leave the impression that only wives have responsibilities. Thus he added a brief note (v. 7) to emphasize that husbands also have responsibilities.

²³This is a generally accepted fact of life. Use whatever illustration is appropriate and understandable where you live. For example, if people play golf where you live, you can note that on most golf courses, the spot where women tee off on each hole is several yards closer to the green than where the men tee off. You can also explain that “weaker” refers only to “brute” strength and not to stamina or longevity. Many women can and do work longer hours than men; and, as a rule, women live longer than men.

her, Sarah was “an heir” with her husband “of the grace of life”—physically in the birth of Isaac (Psalm 127:3), and spiritually in following the way of God (1 Peter 1:4). The fact that Abraham loved and respected her is seen in many incidents in her life. He respected her wishes regarding Hagar (Genesis 16:6; see also Genesis 21:10, 14). He trusted her to care for his vast household on many occasions. When she died at the age of 127,²⁴ he mourned as he reverently placed her body in the Cave of Machpelah near the well-loved oak of Mamre (Genesis 23:1–20).

Even so should a daughter of Sarah be loved and respected today. Her husband ought to be aware that he has found “a good thing” and has obtained “favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22). When she is appreciated as she should be, “her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her” (Proverbs 31:28).

CONCLUSION

This lesson was, first, to be a tribute to all who are already daughters of Sarah. May God bless every daughter of Sarah! You are beautiful,

and we love you.

Also, the lesson is an exhortation to all women to become daughters of Sarah. Are you one? Our text declares that, as a Christian woman, you are her daughter “if you do what is right.” Do you want to become a Christian? Do you need to be restored as an erring Christian? If you plan to “do what is right,” do not wait another day!²⁵ ♦

A NOTE FOR PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

This sermon can be used for Mother’s Day and other occasions. The title can be expanded to read “A Tribute [or Salute] to the Daughters of Sarah.”

²⁴Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age at the time of her death is recorded.

²⁵The term “makeover” has become popular in recent years in the U.S. The term usually refers to a woman’s receiving special treatment by experts to change the look of her hairstyle, makeup, clothing, and the like. If the term is familiar to your listeners, you can suggest that some may need a spiritual “makeover.”