

be never molested more. The whole employment of our lives is to seek how to get thither; get a right and interest, and you are sure to enter at death. Christ hath purchased it by his merit, and hath taken possession of it for us.

4. Observe, God is the builder and maker of heaven. It is put in opposition to cities built by men. God made the earth as well as heaven, but the making of heaven is peculiarly ascribed to him because it is a rare piece of work. God hath spent most of his art on it; there he hath fixed his throne: Ps. ciii. 19, 'The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens.' There is most of his majesty seen, there he is fully enjoyed, and there is an everlasting manifestation of his glory. And he that is the maker of it is the disposer of it, please God, and he will give it thee.

5. Observe, that the fathers looked for an entry into this eternal rest after the ending of their pilgrimage. Here is a clear proof of it—'He looked for a city which had foundations, whose builder and maker is God.'

SERMON XLIV.

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.—HEB. xi. 11.

THE apostle had spoken of the faith of Abraham, and thereupon taketh occasion to mention Sarah's faith. Therefore he saith, *καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα*, 'Through faith also Sara herself,' &c.

Observe, what a blessing it is when a husband and wife are both partners of faith, when both in the same yoke draw one way. Abraham is the father of the faithful, and Sara is recommended among believers as having a fellowship in the same promises, and in the same troubles and trials. So it is said of Zachary and Elizabeth: Luke i. 4, 'And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.' It is a mighty encouragement when the constant companion of our lives is also a fellow in the same faith. The hint directeth us in matter of choice, she cannot be a meet help that goeth a contrary way in religion; when the sons of God went in to the daughters of men because they were fair, it brought a flood, Gen. vi. 2, 3. Such mixtures get a mongrel race. Religion decayeth in families by nothing so much as by want of care in matches.

But to come to the words, here is—(1.) The person believing; (2.) The commendation of her faith; (3.) The ground of it.

First, The person believing—*καὶ αὐτῇ Σάρρα*. Yea also Sarah herself, a woman,—and as to the point wherein her faith was exercised, a woman barren and stricken in age,—she through faith received strength to conceive seed.

Obs. A woman weak in sex may be strong in faith. This is a praise

common both to men and women, they are 'heirs together of the same grace of life,' 1 Peter iii. 7. This should excite women to excel in grace and piety. Sarah hath her praise in the word as well as Abraham. The life of women is for the most part carried on in silence and privacy, yet there is an eminency proper to them. In public services men are most employed, yet women may glorify God in their hearts by faith; there are duties and promises that belong to their private station. As men can speak of Abraham, so women of Sarah. There is a stain upon their sex, that by them sin came first into the world, but then there is this honour put upon them, that by one woman's child salvation was brought into the world. Therefore let women strive, not to continue the stain, but the glory of their sex; not to be first in transgression, the most forward in a family to sin, but to get an interest in him who was made of a woman, and to approve themselves, not only to their husbands, but God: not merely to strive to get a jointure upon earth, but to be heirs with men of the same grace of life, to have an inheritance in heaven, especially if they have religious husbands.

But doth not the apostle contradict scripture in ascribing faith to Sarah? You shall see. In the original story, to which this place alludeth, Sarah is taxed for laughing, and when she was charged with it, denied it, Gen. xviii. 12-15. That laughing certainly was a sign of unbelief. It is true, Abraham laughed: Gen. xvii. 17, 18, 'Then Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah that is ninety years old bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!' Yet there was a difference between Abraham's laughing and Sarah's. Abraham laughed out of faith and holy joy, probably respecting the Messiah that should in process of time come out of his loins: John viii. 56, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it, and was glad.' Yet there is a suspicion upon Abraham's laughter because of his reply—'Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? and shall Sarah that is ninety years old bear?' and because of his prayer for Ishmael,—'O that Ishmael might live before thee!' But the apostle acquits him: Rom. iv. 19, 20, 'Being, not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead when he was about an hundred years old, neither the deadness of Sarah's womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.' Abraham admireth, but staggereth not, and out of a natural affection he prayeth for Ishmael; God reproveth him not as he did Sarah. But now Sarah laughed out of unbelief, and denieth it when charged, because it is said, she laughed within herself, not openly and outwardly. Both laughed to justify the name of Isaac, but Sarah laughs out of distrust, out of the impossibility of the thing; this weakness is manifested to show the honour is not put upon her by her merits. But after the Lord had chidden her, and she began to see the promise came from God, she believed; and because the laughing came from mere weakness, not from scorn, God layeth no judgment on her, as he struck Zacharias dumb for his unbelief in the like case, Luke i. 20, and still an honourable mention is made of Sarah's carriage in this business, not only here, but also 1 Peter iii. 9, 'Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.' Observe hence—

1. Many times the word doth not work presently : Sarah laugheth at first, but afterwards believeth. Some that belong to the purposes of grace may stand out for a while against the ways of God till they are fully convinced ; as Sarah laughed till she knew it to be a word not spoken in jest, but a promise made in earnest. Little did Paul think that those whom he persecuted were so dear to Christ that he counted them himself—‘Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?’ Acts ix. 4. Therefore he says, 1 Tim. i. 13, ‘I was before a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious ; but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly, in unbelief.’ Many serious men, that walk according to the present light of conscience, may slight those ways which afterwards they find to be of God ; and therefore we should be gentle to one another and wait till God reveal the same thing.

2. Usually before the settling of faith there is a conflict—‘Shall I have a child who am old : my lord being old also.’ Reason opposeth against the promise. So it is usual, when we come to settle the heart in the belief of any promise. Look, as when the fire beginneth to be kindled we see smoke first before flame, so it is here before our comforts be established, we are full of doubts ; so that doubtings are an hopeful prognostic, it is a sign men mind their condition.

3. With great indulgence God hideth the defects of his children and taketh notice of their graces. There is nothing spoken of Rahab’s lie, ver. 31, of Job’s impatience, James v. 11, and here Sarah’s laughing is not remembered. Weak faith is accepted ; a spark shall not be lost, but blown up into a flame and greater increase. We give a beggar an alms though he receive it with a trembling palsy-hand ; and if he lets it fall, we let him stoop for it. Man overlooketh the good of others, and taketh notice of their ill, as flies pitch upon the sore place ; but God pardoneth the evil and remembereth the good. We upbraid men with the sins of childhood and of youth, committed before conversion ; as the papists did Beza with his lascivious poems that he wrote ere he had a taste of grace ; therefore he saith, *Hi homines invident mihi gratiam divinam* ; these men envy me the grace of God. The elder brother upbraided the younger brother with riotous living, when his father had received him to mercy : Luke xv. 30, ‘As soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.’ But how contrary is this to God ! If faith breaketh out at length, he accepteth it, and commendeth it in his word. Who would not serve such a gracious master, that winketh at our failings and taketh in good part our weak services and our weak graces ? This for the person believing.

Secondly, The next circumstance in the text is the commendation of her faith from the matter, which was difficult—*She received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child, when she was past age* ; where you may take notice of the fruit of her faith, and the amplification of it. The fruit of her faith where we have the influence of it, ‘She received strength to conceive seed ;’ and the effect of it, ‘and was delivered of a child ;’ The amplification of her faith, ‘when she was past age.’ I shall not stand opening the letter ; see what Beza, Gomarus, and Grotius say concerning the opening of that phrase, *εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος*. Let us observe somewhat—

1. From the influence of her faith — ‘She received strength to conceive seed.’ Learn hence—

[1.] That though bringing forth of children be according to the course of nature, yet God hath a great hand in it. They that have children acknowledge them to be God’s blessing, and that they are his gift: Ps. cxxvii. 3, ‘Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is his reward.’ He can make the barren to bear: Ps. cxiii. 9, ‘He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the Lord.’ It is notable that by God’s special dispensation many precious women were a long time barren, as Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth, the mother of Samson. Partly to show that nature can do nothing without his power and blessing. Partly by these instances to facilitate the belief of the incarnation, as the lesser miracle maketh way for the belief of the greater; certainly that was the intent of Elizabeth bearing John just before Christ was born. If a dead womb can be fruitful, why may not a virgin conceive? It was not fit that another virgin should have this honour, therefore this was the nearest miracle in the same kind. Partly to exercise their faith and patience, and to make way for the greater increase of holiness. Partly that the birth might be more eminent, as Isaac, Samuel, Samson, John, &c. Well then, let them that go barren wait upon God by faith, and prayer, and patience; either God will give children, or one way or another this comfort will be made up to you. It is not always a punishment of sin; many times it is, as God punished Abimelech, till he rendered Sarah, by this, that every womb should be shut up: Gen. xx. 18, ‘For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.’ Michal’s scoffing at David was punished with barrenness: 2 Sam. vi. 23, ‘Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death.’ In Israel it was a great judgment: Hosea ix. 14, ‘Give them, O Lord, what wilt thou give? give them a miscarrying womb, and dry breasts.’ Little of eternity was known, therefore they strove to continue their memory on earth; that is the reason why men love their youngest children, and their grandchildren because they longest preserve their memory in the world. It was a blessing of the law-dispensation; it was a means to continue their faith; every one hoped to be the mother of the Messiah. Well, but now eternity is manifested, be contented, be fruitful in holiness, and your memory shall be provided for.

[2.] Let us improve it spiritually, God can make the church fruitful after a long barrenness: Isa. liv. 1, ‘Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear: break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child, for more are the children of the desolate, than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.’ And Sarah is a type of the church. Let us be fruitful in our old age, let us receive strength to conceive that immortal seed which will bring forth a better issue, whose fruit is joy, peace, and everlasting life.

[3.] Faith hath a great stroke in making way for blessings—‘By faith she received strength to conceive seed.’ Means can do nothing ‘without God, and God will do nothing without faith: Mat. xiii. 58, He did not many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.’ It holdeth in all cases. The word of all instruments is most powerful,

and yet is said, Heb. iv. 2. 'The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.' As a medicinal drink must have all the ingredients mixed with it, or else it worketh not, so if the word be not received in faith, a main ingredient is wanting; this giveth strength to the means to work. By closing with the promise she received strength.

2. From the effect of this influence—'And was delivered of a child.' I observe hence—

[1.] Every promise received by faith will surely be seconded with performance. God's power is exercised when it is glorified, and they are sure to find him faithful that count him faithful: Luke i. 45. And blessed is she that believed, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.' Therefore wait; they that conceive by the promise at the appointed time shall see the birth, and it is a good forerunner of deliverance when we strongly exercise faith upon the promise that revealeth it.

[2.] Faith is the best midwife. By faith Sarah was delivered of a child. Women great with child are very solicitous about getting a good midwife: the apostle commendeth one in this place, one that never miscarried in her work, and yet the saints have employed her for thousands of years. She expecteth not wages nor gifts; faith doth most for them that are poor in spirit, and have nothing to give, that know not what to do without her. Other midwives come not willingly, but where there is some likelihood that they may go through with their business; but faith doth best at a dead lift.

But to leave the metaphor, and to speak something by way of direction in this case, which certainly is of weighty concernment. The apostle saith, Gal. ii. 20, 'The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' Faith is to be exercised, not only in acts of worship, but in acts of your callings, and the ordinary offices of life. We are to trade in faith, to eat in faith, to drink in faith, to sleep in faith, to study in faith, to preach in faith. Now usually in all other cases men are taught how to live by faith, but seldom is anything spoken in this weighty case. How to be delivered of a child by faith, as Sarah was, certainly the danger is great, and if in any extremity there is need of faith, much more where the life of the creature is so much concerned. Let me speak a few words to this matter.

(1.) We must be sensible what need we have to exercise faith in this case, that we may not run upon danger blindfold; and if we escape then to think our deliverance a mere chance. Rachel died in this case, so did Phineas's wife, 1 Sam. iv. 19, 20, and it is a great hazard that you run; therefore you must be sensible of it. God may take this advantage against you to cut you off; you are in the very valley of the shadow of death; deliverance, but that it is so ordinary, would be accounted miraculous. When you look upon it as a matter of course (and you need not trouble yourself about it but only to get the accustomed means), there is no room for faith to work; when difficulty and danger is apprehended in the case, then faith comes: 2 Chron. xx. 12, 'O our God, wilt thou not judge them? for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us, neither know we what to do, but our eyes are unto thee;' 2 Cor. i. 9, 'We had the sen-

tence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead.'

(2.) Because the sorrows of travail are a monument of God's displeasure against sin, therefore this must put you the more earnestly to seek an interest in Christ, that you may have remedy against sin: Gen. iii. 16, 'Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow, thou shalt bring forth children.' Women's pains are more grievous than the females of any kind; sin is the reason of it. Death waylays the child as soon as it is born; the sentence is in force, and there is no remedy but in Jesus Christ the redeemer. Who durst venture upon the pains of travail without a sealed pardon? The sweetness of the second Adam will be your comfort when you feel the bitterness of the first.

(3.) Muse upon God's promise: 1 Tim. ii. 15, 'Notwithstanding, she shall be saved in child-bearing if she continue in faith, and charity, and holiness, with sobriety.' The apostle speaketh there of the woman's being first in the transgression. There is the promise, and the evidences of interest in the promise: 'She shall be saved in child-bearing' that is the promise, which is made good temporally or eternally, as God seeth cause. Some render *διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας*, by child-bearing, as if this was a way by which women go to heaven. But take it as we render it, 'in child-bearing,' it is a promise that serveth to awaken faith, that you may not be amazed with the danger, and if deliverance be obtained, you may look upon it as a blessing of the promise; but generally it is to be understood as all temporal promises, with the exception of God's good pleasure.

(4.) The faith you exercise must be glorifying his power, and casting yourselves upon his will. That expresseth that kind of faith which is proper to all temporal mercies, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst save me; which indeed is enough to ease the heart of a great deal of trouble and perplexing fear.

1st. To glorify his power. Consider to this end the experiences of the saints: Ps. lxxvii. 10, 'I said, This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High;' 2 Cor. i. 10, 'Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us.' For all that danger can do, he is able to deliver us. If you have not your own experiences, yet reflect upon the experiences of others; how God hath assisted them in such-like cases. In every age there are monuments to which we may have recourse, as they said, Ps. lxxviii. 3, 'Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.' So say, Lord, others have told us what thou hast done for them in such cases, supporting weak vessels in great dangers and extremities, why cannot God do the like? yea, Lord, thou canst. Say it still; do not consider your own frailty and fears, but God's power. In innocency there would be no pain at all, though it be caused by natural causes, yet God could have slacked it; and now certainly after the fall, he can mitigate the sentence, especially to those that have an interest in Christ.

2dly. That you may cast yourselves without trouble and disquiet upon his love. Consider his providence extendeth to the beasts: Ps. xxix. 9, 'The voice of the Lord maketh the hinds to calve.' Doth God take

care for oxen, for hinds, for beasts, and will he not for the members of Christ? Remember how soon the extremities of his people do awaken him; he is a very present help in a time of trouble, he hath put pity in a man towards a beast, and hath not the Lord bowels? If a beast hath hard travail, how do we pity it! And will not God? The work you are about is replenishing the world, multiplying the church, things in which God delighteth; and therefore why should you doubt of his assistance?

(5.) Urge all things with God in prayer; it is the work of faith to plead, not only with ourselves, but with God. By this means we do not work upon God, but draw forth principles of trust in the view of conscience; we awaken ourselves; God need not to be informed, but we need it. Therefore say, Lord, thou canst help me; Lord, thou art gracious to the beasts, and thou hast made a promise to me. Especially if you feel hope growing, urge it to God.

3. From the application of her faith—‘When she was past age.’ There were two difficulties: she was naturally barren, Gen. xi. 30, and she was now ninety years of age, and it ceased to be with her ‘after the manner of woman;’ and therefore here lay the excellency of her faith, that she could believe that she should be the mother of a mighty nation. Barren I say she was by natural constitution, and now no better than dead, having so long outlived the natural time of bearing children. Learn hence—

Obs. That no difficulty or hindrance should cause a disbelief of the promise. The reasons are two: partly from God, that maketh the promise; partly from faith, that receiveth the promise.

[1.] From God’s nature. God is not tied to the order of second causes, much less to the road of common probabilities; he will turn nature upside down rather than not be as good as his word. He standeth not upon his works so much as he doth upon his word, his word is over all his works; therefore if God hath said it, it shall come to pass, though heaven and earth be blended together in confusion. If God’s hands were tied, we might startle at a difficulty; but because nothing is hard to providence, nothing is out of order to faith, therefore no difficulty can stand in the way of faith and providence. We judge by our senses, and that is the cause of the weakness of our faith: Zech. viii. 6, ‘If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes, saith the Lord of hosts?’

[2.] From the nature of faith, which is to guide the soul when reason and sense faileth. Here in the world we are guided by three lights—sense, reason, and faith, and all must keep their place: reason corrects sense, and faith reason. A star to sense seems no bigger than a spangle, yet reason telleth me that because it is seen at so vast a distance it must needs be very big. So faith must believe against carnal reason and present feeling; as Abraham: Rom. iv. 18, ‘Who against hope believed in hope;’ that is contrary to all likelihood and probability.

Use. To press us to wait upon God in the greatest difficulties and extremities. When faith hath a promise, impediments of accomplishment should increase it. *Periculum par animo Alexandri.* Here is a fit occasion for my faith. What cannot God do? A woman past age conceiveth! a thing quite contrary to natural course; so often God’s

promises seem absurd and ridiculous to human reason. Therefore wait and hope in the most desperate cases.

But men plead when urged to faith, We have not such a clear promise and oracle as Sarah had, when urged to self-denial, We have not such a clear precept as Abraham had. I answer—

1. General precepts and general promises are enough to try us. God doth not say, Get thee out of thy country; yet he says, Remove thy lusts, and there we stick. God doth not say, You shall have a numerous issue, or such a land for your inheritance; yet he hath promised heaven, and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against his church. Let us try our faith in these promises in a time of difficulty.

2. In all promises, though we have not and cannot have absolute confidence of success, yet difficulty and danger should be no cause of despair. You have still cause to bear up your spirits upon the power and care of God. There may be other means to weaken our dependence, but the greatness of the danger and the unlikelihood of the blessing should never weaken it. This is no matter of discouragement, for we see that God can act contrary to the course of nature. Now danger of miscarrying and unlikelihood of success is the sole cause of distrust. Men never fear but in case of danger: when things go happily on, they are secure. The questions of unbelief still run upon this, Can such or such a thing be? Ps. lxxviii. 19, 20, 'Can the Lord prepare a table in the wilderness? Behold he smote the rock that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed. Can he give bread also? Can he provide flesh for his people?'

3. There is a particular promise that answereth to the dead womb. We are tried in that promise: John xi. 25, 26, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?' Sarah's dead womb was revived as soon as she believed: so sure shall we revive again; he that judgeth Christ faithful shall see life spring from death. But you will say, We know all this, and believe this well enough, as she, John xi. 24, 'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' But yet that is little probable, because present difficulties do so easily amaze us. But to try you a little in your faith and dependence upon this promise, if you hope against hope, and can believe a resurrection out of the grave, this faith will bewray itself in life and death. That hope is worth nothing that is good for nothing.

[1.] In life: we please ourselves in thinking that we believe the resurrection of the dead, when there is no such matter. He that judgeth Christ faithful in the promise of eternal life, notwithstanding death, esteemeth the faithful execution of his will dearer to him than all the pleasures of this life. Our thoughts are discovered in our actions, and our hopes in the course of our lives: 2 Peter iii. 11, 'Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?' Implying that they that are not such manner of persons do not look for such things. A man that prostituteth his body to the service of lust, how can it be said that he looketh for a glorious resurrection to eternal life.

[2.] In death: can we desire death, and check the terrors of it with

the promise of eternal life? Death is your last enemy—can you triumph upon your sick-beds in these hopes, that these your enemies you shall see them no more for ever?

Thirdly, The next circumstance in the text is the ground of her faith—*Because she judged him faithful that had promised.* Hence observe:—

1. Wherever we put forth faith we must have a promise, otherwise it is but fancy, not faith. It is not a ground of expectation barely what God is able to do, but what God will do. As the two pillars of Solomon's house were called Jachin and Boaz, 1 Kings vii. 21, the one signifies 'Strength,' and the other, 'He will establish it.'

2. In closing with the promise, we should chiefly give God the honour of his faithfulness.

1. Because God valueth this most, he standeth much of his truth—'Heaven and earth shall pass away before one jot or tittle of his word shall pass,' Mat. v. 18. The monuments of his power shall be defaced to make good his truth: Ps. cxxxviii. 2, 'Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.' All other attributes give way to this.

2. Because this giveth support and relief to the soul in waiting: Heb. x. 23, 'Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for he is faithful that promised.' God hath promised no more than he is able to perform; his word never exceeded his power.

Use. Well then, meditate of this; silence discouragements when you have a clear promise. The course of nature saith, It cannot be; her own age saith, It cannot be; but still faith replies, God is faithful. In all your debates let this be the judgment and casting voice.

SERMON XLV.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.—HEB. xi. 13.

HAVING laid down the particular instances of the patriarchs, he speaketh of what they had in common, they went to the grave in hope, albeit the promises were not performed in their time.

Here you have the trial of their faith and the victory of their faith.

1. The trial of their faith—*They died, not having received the promises*; that is, they went to the grave ere the blessings God had promised were accomplished.

2. The victory of their faith, which is set forth—

[1.] By the several acts of the soul in and upon the promises, both elicit and imperate. There is an act of apprehension—*They saw them afar off*; an act of judgment or firm assent—*And were persuaded of them*; an act of affection—*ἀσπασάμενοι, And embraced them*—they hugged the promise; this will yield a Messiah.