

# Abraham and Sarah: Faith Tested and Tried



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Gen. 12:2, 16:1–5, 22, James 2:20–26.

**Memory Text:** “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise” (*Hebrews 11:11, NIV*).

By delaying the fulfillment of their promised child, God tested Abraham’s and Sarah’s faith. Many New Testament authors point to Abraham as the prime example of faith (*Romans 4* and *Hebrews 11*). Later in *Hebrews 11* Abraham is commended for his faith in offering Isaac as a sacrifice. James depicts Abraham as an example of both faith and works working together (*James 2:23, 24*).

Genesis presents Abraham as a God-fearing man, hospitable to guests, magnanimous to relatives and servants, and respected by kings and other peoples. Sarah, however, remains mostly in the background. In the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac, where Abraham’s faith is tested, Sarah is not even mentioned. The only times Sarah appears to take the initiative is first in offering Hagar to Abraham and next in insisting that the maid servant and her son Ishmael be sent away. What can we learn from this faithful but flawed couple?

**The Week at a Glance:** Though praised for faith, Abraham and Sarah were time and again examples of those who actually seemed to lack faith in God.

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 14.

## Human Solutions for God's Promise

This first promise to Abraham (*Gen. 12:2*) was not fulfilled within a “reasonable” time, and Abraham and his wife grew quite old. The older they got, the more serious became the matter of an heir or, rather, the lack of one. How could God’s promises be fulfilled? Could Abraham be excused if he sought other interpretations of the promise?

Abraham and Sarah first offered to adopt their servant Eliezer (*Gen. 15:2, 3, NIV*). Some ancient Nuzi tablets, dating to before the time of the patriarchs, shed light on the custom of a childless couple adopting a servant or his son to inherit property. In return the adopted servant had to ensure the adoptive parents a decent burial. The contract stated, however, that it would not stand if the couple subsequently had their own child. Abraham was within his legal rights to think of such a solution. It was an accepted custom.

**How does the second promise in Genesis 15:4, 5 eliminate Eliezer as the promised heir? What more does it promise Abraham about his offspring?**

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The next attempt to secure an heir originated from Sarah. After they had been in Canaan ten years, she suggested that Abraham marry her maidservant Hagar (*Gen. 16:1–3*). Again, some Nuzi tablets have parallels. The wife of a childless couple could give her slave girl to her husband, retaining authority over any children that may result from the union. The Nuzi contracts also state that the son borne by a slave girl would inherit all the property unless the legal wife bore a son later. A son born thus to Abraham would even fulfill God’s promise of “coming from Abraham’s body.”

**How does the third promise, in Genesis 17:16, 19, go beyond the earlier promises? How does it eliminate Ishmael as the promised heir? Read the fourth promise, in Genesis 18:10, 14. How is it the most specific?**

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Twenty-five years passed as Abraham and Sarah waited for the promised heir. With each promise and with each year that passed, God made it more evident that the son would be a miracle child.

**In the context of today’s lesson, read Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:3. What hope can you draw from these texts?**

## Telling Lies

Though Abraham and Sarah were both children of Terah, they did not share the same mother. When God called Abraham to leave home, one of his concerns in facing the unknown was related to his beautiful wife. Abraham could not trust the morals of the heathen, so he told Sarah, his wife and half sister, to declare, wherever they went, that she was his sister rather than his wife (*Gen. 20:12, 13*).

**What reasons did Abraham give for asking Sarah to lie? How valid and logical were those reasons? Why do you think he showed such a lack of trust? See *Gen. 12:11–13*.**

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During periods of famine, Canaanites often went to Egypt, where the fields were watered by the Nile. This was no trip to purchase food but a desire to settle there for a while (*Gen. 12:10*). However, escaping the danger of the famine brought a new danger. Though Sarah was in her 60s, her beauty still caused heads to turn. Abraham's fear was well founded. The Egyptians found her beauty striking enough to report the matter to Pharaoh. It is difficult to imagine how Abraham hoped to get out of this situation other than by lying.

God intervened by sending plagues upon Pharaoh (*vs. 17*), and Pharaoh lost no time in restoring Sarah to her husband and in reprimanding Abraham for his error. The chastised Abraham discovered that Egyptian ethics were superior to his, and that his lack of faith in God was unfounded.

Abraham and Sarah, however, forgot this lesson. Even though much time had passed, or maybe because it had, they repeated this same mistake (*Gen. 20:2*).

**Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which you felt you had to lie in order to get out of a problem? Review what happened: What was your course of action that brought you to that situation to begin with? What was the result of your lie? What caused you to show such a lack of faith? What lessons did you learn that could help you from making the same mistakes again?**

## Laughing at God

**Read** Genesis 17:15–17. What was Abraham’s response to the promise made to him?

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**What** was his other immediate reaction to the promise? *Gen. 17:18.* Why was that such a natural reaction despite God’s clear words to him?

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Abraham lived to be 175 years old (*Gen. 25:7*). Sarah died at the age of 127 (*Gen. 23:1*). Their son, Isaac, lived to 180 (*Gen. 35:28*). Proportionately, it could be today as though Abraham and Sarah were in their 50s when this promise was made to them again. Not surprisingly, the normally unflappable Abraham fell on his face laughing when God repeated the promise of the child to be born to them.

A short while later three heavenly visitors came to Abraham, and while they ate the food Sarah prepared, one of them predicted that the promised child would be born in about a year (*Gen. 18:10*). Like typical Bedouin women, Sarah had stayed out of sight but not out of hearing. Just behind the entrance to the tent she laughed to herself when she heard the prediction (*vs. 12*). This was not a laugh of joy but an element of disbelief.

**Though** Sarah lied in response to the Lord’s inquiry, what was the reason she laughed? *Gen. 18:11, 12.*

Paul in Romans 4:19 describes Sarah’s womb as dead. Indeed, she was from a purely physical standpoint way past childbearing age. When questioned, she tried to cover her disbelief with a lie. The lie did not do its work, and the matter closed on that uncomfortable note.

When the promised child was born, as instructed by God, Abraham named him Isaac, which means “he laughs” (*Gen. 17:19*). The word *Yitzhak* means what it sounds like—a loud, explosive laugh. Sarah added, “‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me’” (*Gen. 21:6, NIV*).

**Write a paragraph about what you believe is the most important lesson for us in this account of Abraham and Sarah. Bring your response to class on Sabbath.**

## Trouble Because of Unbelief

**“Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me’ ”** (*Gen. 16:5, NIV; see also Gen. 16:1–6, 21:8–13, Gal. 4:21–31*).

Of the Nuzi tablets referred to earlier, one of them has a close parallel with the Abraham-Hagar episode. Kelim-ninu is given in marriage to Shennima. The contract states that if Kelim-ninu is barren, she is to take the initiative in obtaining a slave girl for Shennima. Any children the slave girl bears will come under the authority of Kelim-ninu.

Among the gifts that Pharaoh lavished on Abraham and Sarah in Egypt were menservants and maidservants (*Gen. 12:16*). Hagar, her personal maidservant, was an Egyptian and may have been one of those given them by Pharaoh.

**When** Hagar realized she was pregnant, she belittled her mistress. How was this attitude emulated by her son? *Gen. 21:9.*

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Sarah was the first to realize her mistake in giving her maidservant to be a concubine. This became a thorn in their relationship, and it brought grief to all of them. Ishmael was about seventeen when Isaac was weaned (about three). The occasion that sidelined him caused Ishmael to mock (the Hebrew word is *metzahek*) Isaac. Not a happy laugh but a derisive one. Sarah sensed his presence as a threat and insisted that the slave mother and son be dismissed. God concurred (*Gen. 21:12*).

**While** Paul does not name Sarah and Hagar, it is obvious that he refers to them in the New Testament. What does he use these women to symbolize? *Gal. 4:21–31.*

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Paul further adds that those who attempt to gain salvation by works are in spiritual bondage and tend to persecute those who rely on faith and grace for their salvation and who are free.

**What day-by-day things can you do to increase your trust in God and thus avoid the kind of disastrous decisions that unbelief can lead to?**

## Ultimate Demonstration of Faith

**Read** Genesis 22. What great lesson about faith, and the cost of faith, can you take out of this story?

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Canaanites practiced child sacrifice for centuries. Molech and Chemosh, the national gods of the Ammonites and the Moabites, required that children be offered to them in a fire. Assyrians around 800 B.C. offered children to the god Adramelech. Though revolting, the custom does reveal commitment. No parent can easily give up a child to be burnt. Yet the practice must be seen as selfish, for it sacrifices the life of a helpless child for the gain of the parents. Mesha, king of Moab, offered his heir to the throne when he faced defeat in battle (*2 Kings 3:27*).

The Israelites would be faced with this custom as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Read in Leviticus 18:21 the specific instruction of God regarding this practice. Note in *2 Kings 16:3* the extent of the practice in Israel and Judah.

Abraham could well have been smug in his confidence that his God would never require him to do what his pagan neighbors did in their devotion to false gods. His son was the gift from God. Imagine his shock when God actually instructed him to sacrifice his son; imagine how he must have felt about the prospect of coming home to Sarah with the blood of their son on his hands! However, Abraham knew the voice of God and trusted Him. In fact, he informs his servants that “we will come back to you” (*Gen. 22:5, NIV*), reasoning that God could raise him from the dead (*Heb. 11:19*).

James uses Abraham as an example of faith and works. James 2:22 makes the key point, how works and faith go together.

**We're not all called upon to make such great sacrifices for the Lord. But we do need to make them anyway. Look at how you've lived your life during the past year. What kind of choices have you made? Are they choices that reflect an attitude of surrender to God? If not, what changes must you make?**

**Further Study:** Ellen G. White, “The Test of Faith,” pp. 145–155, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“This was not the first occasion on which Abraham had passed Sarah off as his sister. It would almost seem to have been his usual practice, but that heretofore Egypt had been the only place where the ruse caused trouble. Years of success in employing the same deception, since that bitter experience with Pharaoh, had made Abraham forgetful of its lesson of strict rectitude. . . .

“However that may be, the time for the birth of the promised seed was rapidly approaching . . . and Satan took advantage of Abraham’s weakness to thwart the divine plan.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 341.

“We need the faith of Abraham in our day, to lighten the darkness that gathers around us, shutting out the sweet sunlight of God’s love, and dwarfing spiritual growth. Our faith should be prolific of good works; for faith without works is dead.”—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 115.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1** As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final question. What can you learn from one another?
- 2** As a class, share your thoughts on the fact that despite their faults, mistakes, and lack of judgment, Abraham and Sarah are held up as examples of faith. What hope does that present that you could use to encourage those who feel, perhaps, that their failures are too much and that God has rejected them?
- 3** Have those who are willing talk about a time when they had to make a great sacrifice for God. What can you learn from their experiences?
- 4** The mistake with Hagar brought a great amount of grief to the family. How can you help any families you know now who are suffering because of mistakes made by the parents?

**Summary:** Abraham’s and Sarah’s deficiency in faith is highlighted by the duplication of their errors in offering substitute heirs, lying, and laughing. They were not perfect humans, but they loved God and followed His commands. Ultimately, they are examples of great faith.

## Good Life From Bad

Maria Medina grew up in Chile with an abusive father. She had to quit school at age 15 to work. The next year her mother fled home, taking Maria with her. When Maria became pregnant at 18, she preferred to raise the child alone rather than take a chance that the baby's father might become the same abusive kind of man that her father had been. She shared a small apartment with her new baby, her mother, and her brother. They managed the best they could.

When she was 21, an Adventist neighbor gave her some literature about God and offered to study the Bible with her. Maria loved reading the Bible. For the first time in her life she realized that God loves her. She began attending the Seventh-day Adventist church and was overjoyed with her new relationship with God.

As she learned of the power of forgiveness, she realized that she must forgive her father for what he had done to her and the family. His alcoholism had stolen everything the family had worked so hard for, and he still drank. She prayed about going back for months before she felt strong enough to go. Then she confronted her father. "Father," she said, "I forgive you for what you have done to me and to our family. I want to live without hate in my heart, so I forgive you."

"How can you forgive me for what I have done to you and your mother?" he sobbed. Then he told her he had tried to stop drinking, but had not yet broken the habit, though he was drinking far less than when the family lived with him.

Maria's mother and brother are deaf. She has shared her faith with them, but it has been difficult for them to make friends in the church. Eventually, however, they accepted the Adventist faith and joined the church.

Maria rejoices that God has brought so much good into her life, a life that started out so badly. She loves to share her faith with others.

Mission offerings provide materials and evangelistic outreach to lead people such as Maria to Christ. Thank you.



MARIA MEDINA (*left*) lives in southern Chile, where she shares her faith with all who will listen.