

Abraham and Sarah: Faith Tested and Proven



SABBATH—JULY 7

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Genesis 12:2; Genesis 16:1–5; Genesis 22; James 2:20–26.

MEMORY VERSE: “Abraham had faith. So God made it possible for him to become a father. He became a father even though he was too old. Sarah also was too old to have children. But Abraham believed that the One who made the promise was faithful”¹ (Hebrews 11:11, NIV).

GOD DELAYED (WAITED) IN KEEPING HIS PROMISE TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH TO GIVE THEM A CHILD. In this way, He tested Abraham and Sarah's faith. In Romans 4 Paul points to Abraham as one of the best examples of faith. Later, in Hebrews 11, Abraham is praised for his faith in offering Isaac as a sacrifice.² The author (Paul) pictures Abraham as an example of both faith and good actions or deeds working together (James 2:23, 24).

Genesis shows Abraham as a God-fearing man. He is good and kind to guests and very kind to his family and servants. Kings and other people respect Abraham. But Sarah remains mostly in the background. In the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac, God tests Abraham's faith. But Sarah is not even mentioned. The only times Sarah appears to take action is when she first offers her servant Hagar to Abraham and when she demands that Hagar and her son Ishmael be sent away. What can we learn from this faithful but erring (weak) couple?

THIS WEEK'S STUDY UP CLOSE: Abraham and Sarah were praised for their faith. But at times they often seemed to be examples of those who did not have any faith in God.

1. faithful—being true and loyal; being someone that others can trust and count on.

2. sacrifice—the act of giving up something, such as life, to save or help someone or something.

SUNDAY—JULY 8**HUMAN ANSWERS FOR GOD'S PROMISE (Genesis 12:2)**

God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation. But then a long time passed and Abraham still had no child of his own. Abraham and his wife were getting quite old. The older they got, the more serious became the problem of having a child. How could God's promises come true without a child being born to Abraham and his wife? Could Abraham be excused if he tried to figure out other ways for the promise to come true?

Abraham and Sarah first offered to adopt their servant Eliezer (Genesis 15:2, 3). Some ancient (very old) Nuzi tablets give light on the custom³ of a childless couple adopting a servant as their son. The adopted son would receive everything the couple owned when they died. In return the adopted son had to promise to give his adoptive parents a decent burial. But the contract would be broken if the couple finally had their own child. Abraham was within his legal rights to make his servant Eliezer his heir. This was an accepted custom.

How does the second promise in Genesis 15:4, 5 make it clear that Eliezer is not the promised heir? What more does this promise tell Abraham about his offspring?

The next try (attempt) to get an heir came from Sarah. After Abraham and Sarah had been in Canaan ten years, Sarah suggested that Abraham marry her maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16:1–3). In this way a son born to Abraham would even fulfill God's promise of "coming from Abraham's body."

How is the third promise, in Genesis 17:16, 19, even better than the earlier promises? How does it make it clear that Ishmael cannot be the promised heir? Read the fourth promise, in Genesis 18:10, 14. How is it the best promise of all?

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 clearer that the son would be a miracle child.

With today's lesson in mind, read Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:3. What hope can you get from these verses?

MONDAY—JULY 9**TELLING LIES (Genesis 12:11–13)**

Abraham and Sarah were both children of Terah. But they did not share the same mother. When God called Abraham to leave home, one of Abraham's concerns (worries) in fac-

³ custom—something that has been done for a long time and so has become the accepted or common thing to do.

ing the unknown was about his beautiful wife. Abraham could not trust that the people of neighboring nations were pure in heart. So, he told Sarah, who was both his wife and half sister, to say that she was his sister rather than his wife (Genesis 20:12, 13).

What reasons did Abraham give for asking Sarah to lie in Genesis 12:11–13? How good were those reasons? Why do you think Abraham did not trust in God to keep Sarah and him safe?

During times of famine,⁴ Canaanites often went to Egypt, where the fields were watered by the Nile River. Abraham did not go to Egypt just to buy food. He went out of a desire to live there for a while (Genesis 12:10). But escaping the famine brought a new danger. Sarah was in her 60s, but she was still very beautiful. Abraham had a good reason to be afraid. The Egyptians thought she was beautiful enough to tell Pharaoh. It is hard to imagine how Abraham hoped to keep her safe on his own without lying.

God acted by sending plagues upon Pharaoh (Genesis 12:17). Pharaoh acted quickly in returning Sarah to her husband and in scolding Abraham for his mistake. Shamefaced, Abraham learned that Egyptian principles⁵ were nobler (better than) his. Abraham's lack of faith in God was without any good reason.

But Abraham and Sarah forgot this lesson. They again made this same mistake (Genesis 20:2).



Abraham told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister but not his wife. Abraham's lie showed he did not trust in God.

Have you ever felt you had to lie to get out of a problem? Think over what happened. What did you do that brought you to that moment? What happened after you lied? What caused you to fail to show any faith? What lessons did you learn that could help you not to make the same mistake again?

TUESDAY—JULY 10

LAUGHING AT GOD (Genesis 17:15–17)

What was Abraham's answer in Genesis 17:15–17 to the promise made to him?

What was Abraham's other

4. famine—not having enough food.

5. principles—basic rules or standards of good behavior.

answer in Genesis 17:18 to the promise? Why was that answer to God not surprising, even though God's words were very clear?

Abraham lived to be 175 years old (Genesis 25:7). Sarah died at the age of 127 (Genesis 23:1). Their son, Isaac, lived to be 180 years old (Genesis 35:28). If their story took place today, Abraham and Sarah would be in their 50s when this promise was made to them again. So, this was no surprise that 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. While the visitors ate the food Sarah fixed, one visitor said that the promised child would be born in about a year (Genesis 18:10). Like other Bedouin (Near Eastern) women, Sarah had stayed out of sight of the men but not out of hearing. Just behind the entrance to the tent she laughed to herself when she heard the prophecy⁶ (Genesis 18:12). This was not a laugh of joy but a laugh of not being able to believe what was said.

Sarah lied in answer to the Lord's question, but what was the reason given in Genesis 18:11, 12 that she laughed?

Paul in Romans 4:19 describes Sarah's womb as dead. At her age



Abraham and Sarah were too old to bear a child. Sarah laughed when she heard God tell Abraham a child would be born to them.

Sarah should not have been able to bear (have) children. When questioned, Sarah tried to cover her laugh with a lie.

But in spite of Sarah's not believing at first what she heard, the child was born, as God promised. Abraham named the child Isaac, which means "he laughs" (Genesis 17:19). The word *Yitzhak* means what it sounds like—a loud, explosive laugh. Sarah added, " 'God has given laughter to me. Everyone who hears about this will laugh with me' " (Genesis 21:6, NIV).

Write down what you believe is the most important lesson for us in this story of Abraham and Sarah. Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

6. prophecy—something told about what will happen in the future.

WEDNESDAY—JULY 11**TROUBLE BECAUSE OF UNBELIEF (Genesis 16:5)**

Among the gifts that Pharaoh gave to Abraham and Sarah in Egypt were menservants and maidservants (Genesis 12:16). Hagar, Sarah's personal maidservant, was an Egyptian and may have been one of those given to Abraham and Sarah by Pharaoh.

When Hagar learned that she was pregnant, she looked down on Sarah. How was this attitude (feeling) copied by her son, Ishmael, in Genesis 21:9?



When Hagar learned that she was pregnant, she looked down on Sarah.

Sarah was the first to understand her mistake in giving her maidservant to be a concubine⁷ to her husband. This became a thorn in Sarah's marriage with her husband. And it brought sadness to all of them. Ishmael was about 17 when Isaac (about 3 years old) stopped drinking his mother's milk. This caused Ishmael to laugh at Isaac. The Hebrew word for laugh is *metzahek*. It was not a happy laugh but an unkind or scornful one. Sarah sensed that Ishmael was a threat to Isaac. She told Abraham that the slave mother and son should be sent away. God agreed (Genesis 21:12).

Paul does not name Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:21–31. But it is clear that Paul speaks about them in the New Testament. What does Paul say these women symbolize,⁸ or mean?

Paul also adds that those who try to earn their salvation by works⁹ are in spiritual slavery.¹⁰ Such people are likely to mock (make fun of) those who depend on God for their salvation.¹¹

What day-by-day things can you do to cause your trust in God to grow stronger? How can such things help you not to make bad decisions (choices)?

7. concubine—a woman who lives with a man but who is not his wife; also in some countries, a concubine is an additional wife who has less power and importance than the first wife.

8. symbolize—to make an object, mark, sign, or person stand for or represent another object, idea, or some other thing.

9. salvation by works—the untrue belief that good deeds can save us.

10. spiritual slavery—when a person is under the power of sin.

11. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death.

THURSDAY—JULY 12**GREATEST SHOW OF FAITH
(Genesis 22)**

What great lesson about faith and the cost of faith can you take out of the story in Genesis 22?

Canaanites¹² practiced child sacrifice¹³ for many hundreds of years. Molech and Chemosh were the gods of the countries of Ammon and Moab. The Ammonites and the Moabites believed that Molech and Chemosh wanted the people to give up those children to them in a fire. Assyrians around 800 B.C. gave children to the god Adramelech. This custom¹⁴ is disgusting. It shows love for false gods. No parent can easily give up a child to be burnt. But the practice of burning a child in fire for a god must be selfish. This is because the practice ends the life of a helpless child so that the parents can win the god's favor. What a terrible price to pay for favor¹⁵ that they had no way of knowing they would even get!

Abraham probably could boast that his God would never require him to do what his pagan¹⁶ neighbors did in sacrificing children to false gods. Abraham's son was a gift from God. Imagine his shock when God ordered

him to sacrifice his son. Imagine how Abraham must have felt about coming home to Sarah with the blood of their son on his hands! But, Abraham knew the voice of God and trusted Him. In fact, Abraham tells his servants that "we will come back to you" (Genesis 22:5, NIV), reasoning that God could raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

James points to Abraham as an example of faith and works. James 2:22 makes the key point that works and faith go together.



**"And Abraham stretched forth his hand,
and took the knife to slay his son"
(Genesis 22:10).**

12. Canaanites—the people who lived in the land of Canaan before the Israelites came and lived there.

13. child sacrifice—the act of giving a child to a god, usually by putting that child to death.

14. custom—something that has been done for a long time and so has become the accepted or common thing to do.

15. favor—the thought or feeling that someone believes you are good or worthwhile; approval.

16. pagan—having to do with the worship of idols or nature instead of God.

We are not all called upon to make such great sacrifices¹⁷ for the Lord as Abraham was called to make. But we do need to make them anyway. Look at how you have lived your life during the past year. What kind of choices have you made? Are they choices that show surrender¹⁸ to God? If not, what changes must you make?

FRIDAY—JULY 13

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, “The Test of Faith,” pp. 145–155, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.¹⁹

“This was not the first time that Abraham had passed Sarah off as his sister. It would almost seem to have been his usual practice. Egypt had been the only place where this lie caused trouble. Years of success in using the same lie had made Abraham forgetful of its lesson. . . .

“But the time for the birth of the promised seed [child] was quickly coming up . . . and Satan took advantage of²⁰ Abraham’s weakness to spoil God’s plan.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 1, p. 341.

“We need the faith of Abraham in our day, to lighten darkness around us.

This darkness shuts out the sweet sunlight of God’s love, and stunts [not to grow] spiritual growth.²¹ Our faith should be filled with good works, because faith without works is dead.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 115.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final question. What can you learn from your class members?
- ❷ Abraham and Sarah may have had their faults, mistakes, and lack of judgment. But they are still good examples of faith. What hope does that give you to help those who feel that their mistakes are too much and that God has refused to accept them?
- ❸ Have those class members who are willing talk about a time when they had to make a great sacrifice²² for God. What can you learn from what they went through?
- ❹ The mistake with Hagar brought a great amount of sadness to the family of Abraham. How can you help any families you know who are now suffering because of mistakes made by their parents?

17. sacrifices—the act of giving up things of value, such as life or time or money, to save or help someone or something.

18. surrender—the act of giving one’s whole life to Jesus to love and serve Him and obey His holy law.

19. patriarchs and prophets—patriarchs are early Bible leaders, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men and women sent by God to warn us about what will happen in the future.

20. took advantage of—to make use of for one’s own gain.

21. spiritual growth—becoming more like Jesus.

22. sacrifice—the act of giving up something, such as life, to save or help someone or something.