

Abraham *and* Sarah: Faith Tested *and* Tried



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 12:2; 16:1–5; chapter 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 maidservant 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?

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?

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?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 11:11*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: God can do through us what we can't do alone.

Feel: Trust God, claim His promises, and wait on Him.

Do: Commit to having your faith made perfect by works.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. "She Is My Sister" (*Genesis 12:11–20; 15:1; chapter 20*)

A God says, "Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield." Yet, Abram constructs his own defense, forged of a lie, to protect Sarai from Pharaoh. Why does this *shield* prove to be only base metal?

B White lies hold some truth. What do the results of Abraham's white lie to Abimelech say about how God views the slightest deviation from truth?

II. The Other Woman (*Genesis 16, 18:11–14*)

A Ten years pass after God promises to make of Abraham a great nation. Sarah gives Hagar to her husband in an attempt to fulfill God's promise her way. Tragedy results. What lesson is here for us who are tempted to lose faith in God's promises because fulfillment seems overly delayed?

B Sarah's womb was dead; likewise, every sinner is dead in sin. What other spiritual parallels can be drawn from Isaac's miraculous birth that help us understand the miracle of the new birth in Christ?

III. Laying It All on the Altar (*Gen. 22:1–18*)

A Why does God command Abraham to perform human sacrifice? What is it that God really wanted Abraham to sacrifice? What does He want from us?

B Despite the terror that he must have felt at being a sacrifice, Isaac submits in perfect obedience to his father. What does this reveal about submitting to our heavenly Father, no matter the circumstances?

► **Summary:** Abraham and Sarah work out God's plan for them in their own wisdom and fail. It is only when they surrender everything to God that they gain through faith what they could not secure through their own efforts.

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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*.

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 reproving 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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Abraham is a towering character in the Bible. Almost 10 percent of Genesis is devoted to his life. With him begins the concept of a call, a covenant, a chosenness that define God’s people. He is called the father of the faithful (see Rom. 4:11, Gal. 3:7) and the friend of God (see 2 Chron. 20:7, James 2:23). Sarah’s faith draws a special attention of its own (see Heb. 11:11). As you study the pilgrimage of this couple, motivate your class to understand God’s promise and purpose in the midst of life’s struggles.

Abraham is a great model—not because of any intricate greatness in himself but because of a recognition of, and obedience to, the voice of the true God in the midst of Ur’s glittering paganism. When he heard that voice, he believed in God, took his wife, and “went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8, *NKJV*). Saving faith is not a matter of history or geography, philosophy or science, politics or economics. Neither is it blind or dumb or deaf. It is an abiding trust in a Person—the Person of God. He speaks; faith obeys. Abraham, from the start, grasped that link, and Sarah too (see Heb. 11:11)! Together they have left us the trail, the trial, and the triumph of faith.

Reflect: Have your class members read Hebrews 11:8–19, one verse each. Ask them to talk about what characteristics of the faith of Abraham and Sarah stand out as prominent.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: Abraham and Sarah must have had their own desires and strategies—but these were set aside in order that God’s goal in history may be fulfilled. Let your class members share what they appreciate most from these pioneers of faith.

Bible Commentary

Genesis records at least eight conversations God had with Abraham. Although only one of these directly involves Sarah, both husband and wife

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Laughing at God

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

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?

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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

are united in the pilgrimage of faith. Three parts of this pilgrimage deserve our attention: the call, the covenant, and the triumph.

I. Heeding the Call

God said, “Get thee out,” and Abraham took Sarah and left (*see Gen. 12:1–5*). Accomplished, respected, and blessed with wealth, Abraham was no penniless nomad. Wealth or poverty, eloquence or timidity, does not prepare one to come to God’s notice. God’s call is His sovereign act. He knows the end from the beginning. A shepherd in Tekoa, a prince of Egypt, a fisherman by Galilee, a Pharisee rushing to Damascus—it does not matter. God chooses. God calls. Whoever accepts the call must “get out” and “join in.”

Get out of what? Get out of your family, your community. Get out of self, and join the pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Abraham and Sarah were pioneers of that pilgrimage. Even though the destination was clouded in a mist, they knew the One who promised. They knew the reality of the promised city “whose builder and maker is God” (*Heb. 11:10*). A true disciple puts on the pilgrim’s robes, picks up the telescope of faith, sees the reality at a distance, and walks steadily with no distraction of time or distance.

Discuss: God told Abraham, “Get thee out.” Jesus commanded His disciples, “Follow Me.” Both commands call for a “giving up” and a “taking on.” Are such commands practical and doable?

II. Becoming Covenant Children

The relationship of the covenant. Although the idea of covenant appears in the case of Adam (*see Gen. 3:15*) and Noah (*see Gen. 9:12, 15, 16*), the first formal expression of covenant as the basis of the God-human relationship is expressed in the case of Abraham—at least eight times (*see Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–16; 15:1–6; 16:10; 17:1–7, 21; 22:17*). Further, God established circumcision (*see Gen. 17:9, 10*) as a sign of the personal and intimate bond involved in the covenant. The apostle Paul universalizes this intimate relationship by redefining circumcision from an act of flesh to an act of a renewed heart (*see Rom. 2:29; Gal. 6:15; Col. 2:11, 12*).

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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*.

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*.

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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The means of the covenant. Crucial to the covenant is the birth of an heir, but Abraham was childless. He considers whether his servant Eliezer should be adopted as his heir (*see Gen. 15:1–3*). No, says the Lord; the heir shall come from Abraham’s flesh. Sarah interprets Abraham’s flesh in biological terms. She wants to help out God—and therein is great danger—and seeks for the heir through Hagar. Ishmael is born (*Genesis 16*), but 13 years later, God says no again. The heir shall be born to Sarah (*Gen. 17:6, 18:10*). By now “Sarah had passed the age of childbearing” (*Gen. 18:11*), but God assures the aged couple, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (*Gen. 18:14*). Sarah, at 90, dead as far as childbearing is concerned, feels a divine disturbance within her. Withered tissues of her womb blossom and make way for the covenant child. Faith stood vindicated.

Discuss: Both Abraham and Sarah knew God had a future for them. Yet, twice (*Genesis 12:10–20; chapter 20*) they faltered and lied about their marital relationship, and twice they wanted to help God fulfill the covenant through Eliezer and Ishmael. What does this reveal about human nature and divine grace?

III. Faith’s Test and Triumph

“God tested Abraham” (*Gen. 22:1*). At the age of 120, Abraham faces one final test. God calls the patriarch to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. What kind of God is this? A sadist? A contradictory being who commands one thing and demands something else? One moment He forbids murder and at another He seeks it as a sacrifice? Or was Abraham going through old-age delusion? Such were the whispers Satan must have thundered into Abraham the night before the journey to Moriah. But genuine faith is made of sterner stuff. It does not question God’s character; that is Satan’s job, not the believer’s. Abraham places Isaac on the altar. The parents had not failed in their duty: to train Isaac to be a child of faith.

“Here I am” (*Gen. 22:1, 7, 11*). Three times Abraham responds *hineni* (“Here I am”)—when God was about to ask for Isaac’s sacrifice, when Isaac was about to query his father about the absence of the lamb, and when the angel was about to stop Abraham’s hand from slaying Isaac. Three times he responded with the same answer of readiness: to obey God’s call, to assure his son in the certainty of God’s ways, to celebrate God’s saving ways at life’s most critical times. Whatever the situation, faith never wavers.

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Ultimate Demonstration of Faith

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

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 burned, 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

“God will provide for Himself” (*Gen. 22:8*). Isaac’s earnest and urgent query (“Here is the fire, here is the wood, but where is the lamb?”) gets a most appropriate reply. To a person of faith comes no test or trial without the assurance that God is able to meet every situation. That assurance originated in God’s throne room when the Father provided the sacrifice in the form of His Son dying on the cross. To accept that Son is the ultimate victory for every crisis one encounters. God always provides.

Discuss: “By faith Abraham . . . offered up Isaac” (*Heb. 11:17*). What kind of a faith is that—reasonable or presumptuous? Why do you agree with the apostle’s reasoning that God, who performed the biological miracle of Isaac’s birth, can perform a resurrection miracle?

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: As you go through the lesson, lead your class to discuss how they can practice the principles found in this lesson.

Thought Question:

“A well-ordered Christian household is a powerful argument in favor of the reality of the Christian religion.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 144. If you practice this principle, what changes would you have to make in your home?

Application Questions:

Why do you think God called Abraham His friend (*James 2:23*)? Is it possible for you to be God’s friend? If so, how?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: Abraham and Sarah found their strength by believing in God. Encourage your class members to share their faith struggles and experiences.

Marriage is a sacred relationship. But is it a relationship worth saving even if it costs one’s life? Evidently Abraham faltered, and Sarah went along with the conspiracy. Are there other ways in which a couple could conspire to betray the sanctity of marriage? What is the sole protection in such situations?

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.