

Sarah . . . and Abraham

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-week series

June 25, 2017

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Genesis 17:15–19 (CEB)

¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her.”

¹⁷Abram fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, Can a 100-year-old man become a father, or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child? ¹⁸To God Abraham said, “If only you would accept Ishmael!”

¹⁹But God said, “No, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son for you, and you will name him Isaac. I will set up my covenant with him and with his descendants after him as an enduring covenant.

Genesis 18:1–15 (CEB)

The LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day’s heat. ²He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply. ³He said, “Sirs, if you would be so kind, don’t just pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant.”

They responded, “Fine. Do just as you have said.”

⁶So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, “Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!” ⁷Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly. ⁸Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate.

⁹They said to him, “Where’s your wife Sarah?”

And he said, “Right here in the tent.”

¹⁰Then one of the men said, “I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son!”

Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were both very old. Sarah was no longer menstruating. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, I’m no longer able to have children and my husband’s old.

¹³The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Me give birth? At my age?’ ¹⁴Is anything too difficult for the LORD? When I return to you about this time next year, Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵Sarah lied and said, “I didn’t laugh,” because she was frightened.

But he said, “No, you laughed.”

When it comes to the Bible, you’d best keep an eye on the person standing to the side.

There is one thing you quickly learn when you begin to dig into the Bible. You better keep an eye on the “supporting actors and actresses,” the ones you expect to play a small role, those who seem superfluous but soon prove essential to God’s plan. There is no better example than Sarah, the wife of Abraham. We are used to telling their story with the focus on Abraham, for, indeed, the Bible does just that. At least on the surface. Here is how we typically tell the story:¹

Nearly 2,000 years before Jesus, we meet a man named Abram.² One day, God speaks to Abram. There is no fanfare, no burning bush, no angels or flaming swords. Just a guy and the Creator of the Cosmos.

¹ To make my point, I’ve taken this from a study I wrote five years. Pretty standard stuff.

² Later in the book of Genesis, Abram will be given a new name by God. “Abraham” means something like “father of a multitude.” The name of Abram’s wife, Sarai, will be changed to Sarah. God changes Abram’s

There is nothing distinctive about Abram. God could have chosen anyone through whom he would begin the restoration of all creation, but he chose Abram. Abram, later called Abraham, would become the father, the patriarch, of God's people.

God makes three promises to Abram and to his wife, Sarai (later, Sarah) when he comes to him that day:

1. God will give them a land.
2. God will make Abram's family a great nation.
3. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

There does seem to be one problem with God's plan. Abram and his wife are old . . . really old. Sarai is far past child bearing years. But, God promises them a family and it is a family they will get.

It is the third promise that gets forgotten and overlooked; yet, I couldn't really overstate its importance. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet. Such blessing will be brought to all the people of the earth.

Sure, Sarai is in the picture, but just because God promised Abram lots of descendants, it doesn't necessarily have to include Sarai . . . or does it?

Sarai and Hagar

Sarai knows how things work. She is way too old to give Abram the child, the heir, that God has promised. She knows that there must be a child of the promise, so she concocts a scheme to get one. She sends an Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, into Abram's tent to have sex with him and, hopefully, get pregnant by Abram. Then, Sarai will take this child as her own and raise the child to be Abram's heir. All this seems odd and even wrong to us, but in their world this was done. Ancient Near Eastern legal texts speak of an infertile wife having a slave become pregnant by the husband, and then the wife stepping as mother to the child.

However, in the case of Sarai and Hagar, things do not go well. Hagar does get pregnant and begins to disrespect and harass Sarai. Hagar was the one who bore Abram a son and seemed to have forgotten that Sarai was the first wife and was due all the attendant rights and respect.

So, Sarai insisted that Hagar and the child, Ishmael, leave the tribe. They would return, only to leave a second time when new troubles arose. But God didn't forget Hagar and Ishmael, blessing them both (Genesis 16:7-16).

With the departure of Hagar and Ishmael, Abram and Sarai were back to where they started. No child, no heir. But God came to Abram and reiterated the promise he has made earlier, only now Sarai was pulled into it directly. Sarai (now called Sarah), would be the one to bear Abram (now called Abraham) a child of the promise, the one to whom the covenant would pass. It would now be clear that the promises made to Abraham at the beginning were as much Sarah's as they were her husband's.

Still, Sarah was much too old to have a child and Abraham fell on the ground in laughter when God told him what was to be. Abraham even pleaded with God to accept

name when God tells Abram that circumcision of male children is to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abram. Sarai's new name, Sarah, means something like "princess," for she will be the mother of kings. In ancient cultures, a new name would signify a new phase in the person's life.

Ishmael as the heir of the covenant (Genesis 17:17-18). But God said no, it would be Sarah.

And so things would stay, until one warm afternoon.

Abraham and Sarah welcome God and his angels

One day, three visitors arrive at the home of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham shows these men radical hospitality, even beyond what was expected. He had a young, choice calf slaughtered and roasted for them. Abraham's finest flour is used to make bread for his guests. He brings out curds and milk for them.

And while the visitors eat, Abraham does not intrude or force himself on them. He stands quietly nearby. He is the perfect host.

And who are these visitors? The LORD and what are usually taken to be angels. The reader knows this, but not Abraham and Sarah – at least not yet. And the Lord reiterates the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah.

Straining to overhear the conversation, Sarah, like her husband, laughs at the prospect of her own pregnancy. Walter Brueggemann writes about Sarah and Abraham's laughter:

Once again, this story shows what a scandal and difficulty faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity. Abraham and Sarah have by this time become accustomed to their barrenness. They are resigned to their closed future. They have accepted that hopelessness as "normal." The gospel promise does not meet them in receptive hopefulness but in resistant hopelessness. This story embodies a statement of irony, for the total Abraham/Sarah story is about a call embraced. But in this central narrative, the call is not embraced. It is rejected as nonsensical. And indeed, if no new thing can intrude, if newness must be conjured from present resources, the promise announced here truly is nonsensical.³

But all things are possible with God. And she does give birth, to a boy. God supplied an appropriate name for the boy, Isaac, which means "he laughs." So . . . you tell me. Just how important is Sarah to the story of Abraham and God's entire rescue project? Through all the rest of the biblical story, we will have to be careful to pay attention to the supporting players.

"All the families of the earth"

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of God's promises to Sarah and Abraham. God's call sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, they will become the parents of a great nation. Yes, they will go to the land given them by God. But, most importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through them. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham and Sarah's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

This couple is not chosen by God merely for their own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. The book of Ruth tells the story of a young Moabite woman who, through her Jewish mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God's people.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others.

³ Brueggemann, W. (1982). *Genesis* (pp. 158–159). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Sarah takes some pretty hard knocks for her role in the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Some say that she doesn't trust God enough and takes matters into her own hand. Others say she is doing what all of us do, try as best to we can to discern God's hope for us act accordingly. What do you think? Was she trying to take things out of God's hands or merely participate in the working out of God's purposes? You might go through the stories of Sarah and today's Scripture passages before coming to a conclusion.
2. In the end, we come to realize that the heir of the promise must be Sarah's child every bit as much as Abraham's. Why do you think this would be so? What message might we take away from this. It is important to remember that this is from an utterly patriarchal world. Does Sarah's story work against patriarchy? If so, how?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: Stories of Sarah

Monday, Genesis 12:1-9 Abram and Sarai head for Canaan.

Tuesday, Genesis 12:10-20 Abram takes Sarai to Egypt and passes her off as his sister!

Wednesday, Genesis 16 Sarai conceives and implements her plan.

Thursday, Genesis 20 Abraham and Sarah visit Gerar and again he passes her off as his sister.

Friday, Genesis 21:1-21 Hagar and Ismael are sent away for the second and final time.

Saturday, Genesis 23 Sarah's death and burial

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Kings of Israel*

Coming up: *The Truth About Angels*

Coming in October 2018: A cruise to Israel with Scott & Patti

For more information go to www.scottengle.org