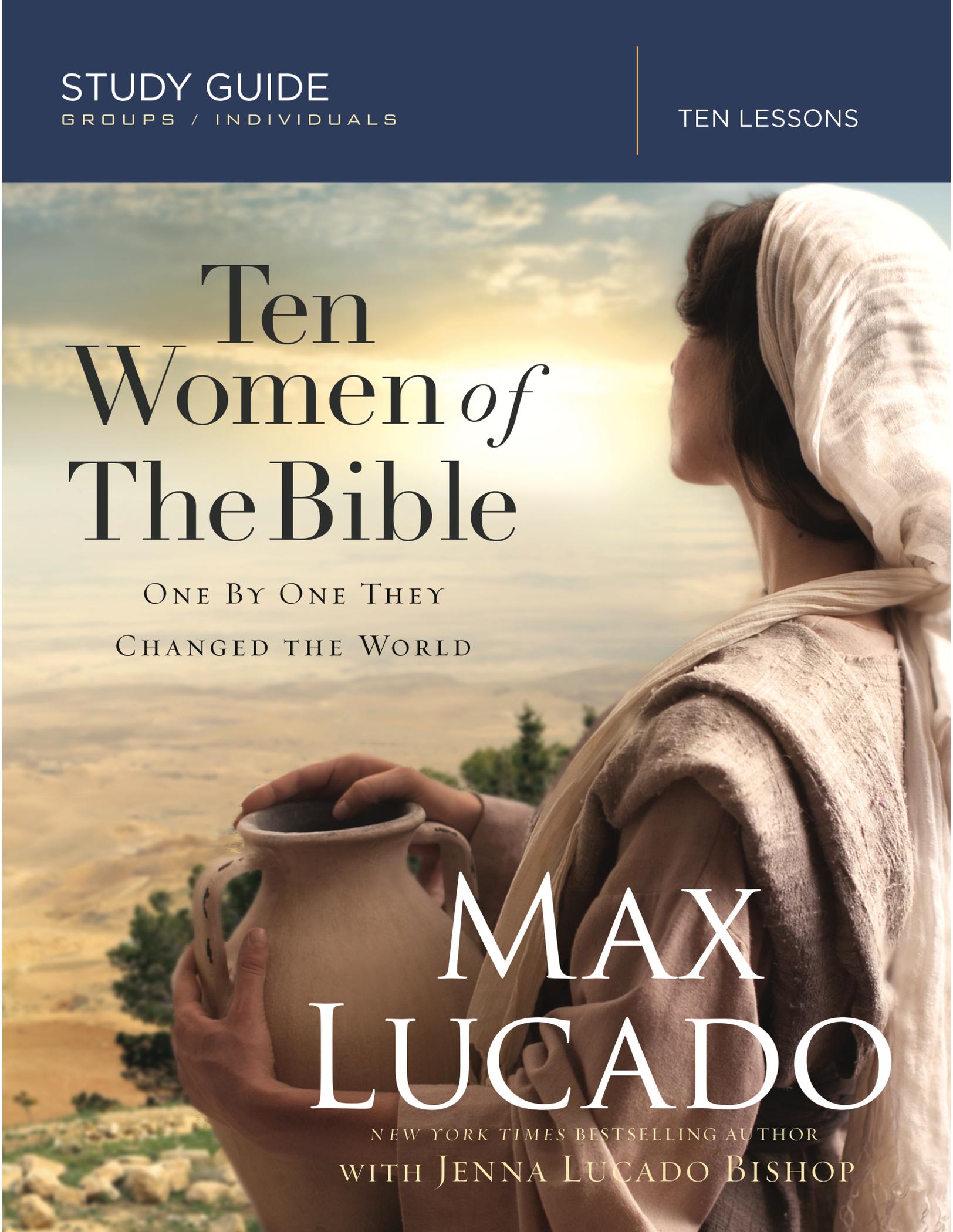


STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

TEN LESSONS

Ten Women of The Bible

ONE BY ONE THEY
CHANGED THE WORLD



MAX
LUCADO

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
WITH JENNA LUCADO BISHOP

Ten Women *of* The Bible

ONE BY ONE THEY CHANGED THE WORLD

.....
STUDY GUIDE
.....

BY JENNA LUCADO BISHOP

FROM THE WRITINGS OF

MAX
LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Ten Women of the Bible

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INTRODUCTION

THE CAST

The ten women of the Bible we're going to focus on in this study came from a range of different backgrounds. Some we know only by clues as to their nationality left in the Scripture. Some we know only by the place they are believed to have lived. Some were queens and women of power and influence in their world. Others were relegated to the fringes of society.

Some of their stories are inspiring. In a society in which the contributions of women were often overlooked, their actions stood out for one reason or another to the writers of Scripture. Others, marked by scandal and intrigue, provide a cautionary tale for us. Yes, all of their stories are different. And yet all of them provide lessons for us today . . .

Sarah, the woman whom God promised would give birth to a nation, but who would also at times try to rush God's plans.

Rahab, a prostitute in the Canaanite city of Jericho, who would save herself and her family through her faith in the one true God of the Israelites.

Abigail, a woman whose wisdom and well-placed words quieted the wrath of King David and prevented the deaths of many people.

Esther, a young queen whom God placed in the Persian court for "such a time as this" to prevent the genocide of the Jewish people.

Mary, the young virgin pledged to Joseph, whom God would choose to give birth to Jesus, the promised Messiah who would save the world.

The Samaritan Woman, who would meet this Messiah at a well one day. His words would forever after change her life.

The Canaanite Woman, who made God smile with her wit and faith, and who received from Jesus an answer to her prayer.

Mary of Bethany, a friend of Jesus who witnessed the resurrection of her brother, Lazarus, and then anointed Christ in anticipation of his death and resurrection.

Mary Magdalene, who traveled with Jesus as one of his followers and was given a unique front-row seat to his victory over death.

Sapphira, a woman in the early church who, along with her husband, made the unfortunate (and deadly) decision to lie to the Holy Spirit.

The lives of these women are very different from our own. And yet, in many ways, we often find ourselves facing the same issues they faced. The promises of God that don't seem to come to pass. The barbaric behavior of others in our world that forces us to play peacemaker. The overwhelming nature of the tasks the Lord has set before us. The injustice of a world that judges us for our past, finds us guilty, and says we will always be considered a failure.

Even more, these stories show us there is a God who sees us where we are and loves us for who we are. He is the one who hovers over all the pages of the Bible, shaping lives, rescuing hearts, healing sicknesses, raising what was dead to life, and passing out high callings to those who choose to follow him and have faith in him.

So, if you ever feel like a second-class citizen in this world and wonder how God could possibly use you to change lives, just look at the stories of these women in the Bible. As you do, you will come to the conclusion—as the disciple Peter did—that God "does not show favoritism but accepts from every

nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34–35). And as you study their lives, you will uncover important truths God wants you to grasp.

Let’s get started!

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study guide is designed to help you delve into God’s Word and learn more about these ten fascinating women in the Bible. Each session contains the following elements:

OPENING INSIGHTS: To help you get to know more about these ten women, each session opens with an insight and a retelling of the character’s story as drawn from Max’s books. Two reflection questions will then get you thinking about how each person’s story relates to your own.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY: Each session contains five days of Bible study with insights drawn from Max’s books and leading questions to help you navigate the stories of these women in Scripture.

POINTS TO REMEMBER: Each day’s session concludes with a summary of the main points in the study. These serve as reminders to the key points of Max’s teaching and a review at the close of your study time.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY: Each day’s session includes a prayer to help you focus your thoughts on God and move into your quiet time with him.

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSES: Our lives are changed when we encounter Jesus, and our hearts are changed by what is kept there. The weekly memory verse will relate to the main theme of the session and help you hide God’s Word in your heart.

SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS: Many Scripture quotes have been provided in the margins to help you follow the retelling of the story in your Bible.

During the daily Bible study portions, in addition to answering the questions that have been provided, you will also want to make notes of what comes to mind as you read the selected passage of Scripture. Be sure to have pen and paper for writing. Commit this time to the Lord and ask him to reveal himself to you as you work through each of the sessions.

FOR LEADERS

If you would like to lead a group through the material in this study guide, please see the section at the end of the guide for a basic design of how to set up your group time, navigate problems and opportunities that may come up during your discussion time, and get the most out of the study as a group.

LESSON 1

SARAH

LIFE IN THE KINGDOM OF THE ABSURD

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. Its citizens are drunk on wonder. Consider the case of Sarai. She is in her golden years, but God promises her a son. He says to her husband, Abram, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2).

So Sarai gets excited. She visits the maternity shop and buys a few dresses. She plans her shower and remodels her tent . . . but no son. She eats a few birthday cakes and blows out a lot of candles . . . still no son. She goes through a decade of wall calendars . . . still no son.

So Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands. (*Maybe God needs me to take care of this one.*) She convinces Abram that time is running out. (*Face it, Abe, you ain't getting any younger, either.*) Sarai then commands her maid, Hagar, to go into Abram's tent and see if he needs anything. (*And I mean “anything”!*)

Hagar goes in a maid. She comes out a mom. And the problems begin.

Hagar is haughty. Sarai is jealous. Abram is dizzy from the dilemma. And God calls the baby boy a “wild donkey.” It's an appropriate name for one born out of stubbornness and destined to kick his way into history. This isn't the cozy family Sarai expected. And it isn't a topic Abram and Sarai bring up very often at dinner.

Finally, fourteen years later, when Abram is pushing a century of years and Sarai ninety . . . when Abram has stopped listening to Sarai's advice, and Sarai has stopped giving it . . . when the wallpaper in the nursery is faded and the baby furniture is several seasons out of date . . . when the topic of the promised child brings sighs and tears and long looks into a silent sky . . . God pays them a visit and tells them they had better select a name for their new son. Abram and Sarai have the same response: laughter.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great” (Genesis 12:1–2).

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar . . . (16:1).

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (17:17).

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer
(Romans 12:12).

They laugh partly because it is too good to happen and partly because it might. They laugh because they have given up hope, and hope born anew is always funny before it is real. They laugh at the lunacy of it all.

1. Put yourself in Sarai's shoes. It had been fourteen years since God's original promise of a son. Now, she is *ninety*. *Ninety!* God must have forgotten his promise, right? Wrong. God does the unthinkable—a son. No wonder she laughed! Have you ever let out a “Sarai laugh” because of God interrupting your familiar life with the unexpected? Describe what happened.

2. What blurs your kingdom vision? What is it that gets in the way of your seeing the world with spiritual eyes—with believing God can do the impossible?

*He called a little child to him. . . .
And he said: “Truly I tell you . . .
whoever takes the lowly position
of this child is the greatest in the
kingdom of heaven. And whoever
welcomes one such child in my name
welcomes me”* (Matthew 18:2–5).

As citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we are often surprised when God does the “absurd,” works miracles, and moves in unimaginable ways. All too often we grow comfortable in a life that we see, touch, and manage on our smartphones. But Jesus said, “Unless you . . . become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). A child lives in constant wonder and faith in the unimaginable. Yet Sarah's childless life would test her childlike faith. As you read her story, it is possible that you will relate to her journey. And it's probable that God will grow your childlike faith along the way.

PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Jesus, nothing is impossible for you. Forgive us for the times we get so wrapped up in the kingdom of earth that we forget about the kingdom of heaven. We want to live expecting the unexpected, trusting in a God whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are higher than our ways (see Isaiah 55:9). In your mighty name, amen.

Day One: Promise Given

INTEGRITY FOR SECURITY

When we first meet Sarai, she is living in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, located in modern-day Iraq. In addition to being told she is Abram’s wife, we also read she is childless because she was not able to conceive (see Genesis 11:30). When Sarai’s father-in-law, Terah, takes the family on the move, she and Abram end up in the city of Haran. It is there the Lord appears to Abram, tells him to go to Canaan, and promises to make him into a great nation.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, “It was by faith Abraham obeyed God’s call to go to another place God promised to give him. He left his own country, not knowing where he was to go” (11:8 NCV). Yet in spite of this faithfulness, we wouldn’t exactly expect to see either his or Sarai’s names listed in “Who’s Who in Purity and Sainthood.”

Why? Well, for Abram’s part, he has a fibbing tongue that won’t stop!

Shortly after the first visit from God, a famine in the land of Canaan sends the couple and their family down to Egypt. It is here we read an interesting detail about Sarai: she was exceptionally beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that Abram fears the Egyptians will kill him to get to her. So, in order to save his neck, he lets the word get out that Sarah isn’t his wife but his sister . . . which is only half true.

And then, not long after, he does it again! “Abraham moved south to the Negev and lived for a while between Kadesh and Shur, and then he moved on to Gerar. While living there as a foreigner, Abraham introduced his wife, Sarah, by saying, ‘She is my sister.’ So King Abimelech of Gerar sent for Sarah and had her brought to him at his palace” (20:1–2 NLT).

Twice Abram and Sarai trade integrity for security. Is that what you call confidence in God’s promises? Can you build a nation on that kind of faith? As it turns out, God can. God took what was good, forgave what was bad, and used Abram and Sarai to change history.

1. Read Genesis 12:1–9. Sarai was sixty-five, and Abram seventy-five, when God asked them to journey approximately 400 miles from their home to a strange land called Canaan. Not exactly an easy move to the suburbs. How do they respond to the call? When was a time God called you into the unfamiliar? How did you respond?

Abram’s wife was Sarai . . . [she] was childless because she was not able to conceive . . . and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan (Genesis 11:29–30).

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country (Hebrews 11:9).

“Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake” (Genesis 12:13).

Abimelech called Abraham in and said . . . “You have done things to me that should never be done” (20:9).

He took his wife Sarai . . . and they set out for the land of Canaan (12:5).

By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise (Hebrews 11:11).

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there (Genesis 12:10).

2. Check out Hebrews 11:8–12. How did Sarai and Abram demonstrate their faith (see verse 8)? What is the spiritual implication of dwelling in tents (see verse 10)? How can we be modern-day “tent dwellers” in the way we trust and follow God?

3. The story of Sarai and Abram is one of phenomenal faith, but this doesn’t mean they didn’t stumble at times. Read Genesis 12:10–20. What takes Abram from a place of faith in God’s promise to forgetting God’s promise? What circumstances cause your own heart to forget God’s promises?

4. The idea of “God’s promises” is tossed around a lot in Christian circles, but what does it mean? What are God’s promises? What do these verses say about the promises of God?

Numbers 23:19: “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (NKJV).

1 Kings 8:56: “Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant” (NASB).

2 Corinthians 1:20: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing people what is wrong in their lives, for correcting faults, and for teaching how to live right” (NCV).

TOUGH TO SWALLOW

By the time the Lord again appears to Abram, he and Sarai are finding God’s promises about as easy to swallow as a chicken bone. “Master,” he says, “what use are your gifts as long as I’m childless . . . ? You’ve given me no children, and now a mere house servant is going to get it all” (Genesis 15:2–3 MSG).

God’s response? “No problem.”

Abram must have looked over at Sarai at that point as she shuffled by in her gown and slippers with the aid of a walker. The chicken bone stuck for a few minutes but eventually slid down his throat. Just as he was turning away to invite Sarah to a candlelight dinner, he heard promise number two.

“Abram.”

“Yes, Lord?”

“All this land will be yours.”

Imagine God telling you that your children will someday own Fifth Avenue, and you will understand Abram’s hesitation.

“On that one, Father, I need a little help.” And a little help was given.

God told Abram to take three animals, cut them in half, and arrange the halves facing each other. To us, the command is mysterious. To Abram and Sarai, it wouldn’t have been at all. They’d seen the ceremony before. Abram had participated in it. He’d sealed many covenants by walking between the divided carcasses and stating, “May what has happened to these animals happen also to me if I fail to uphold my word” (see Jeremiah 34:18).

Abram’s heart must have skipped a beat when he saw the lights in the darkness passing between the carcasses. The soft golden glow from the coals in the firepot and the courageous flames from the torch. What did they mean? The invisible God had drawn near to make his immovable promise. “To your descendants I have given this land” (Genesis 15:18 NKJV).

And though God’s people would often forget their God, he didn’t forget them. He kept his word. The land became Abram and Sarai’s.

5. Take a look at the conversation between God and Abram in Genesis 15. The Hebrew name that Abram calls God in verse 2 is *Adonai*, which means “Lord, Master.”¹ What does this tell you about how

The word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir” (Genesis 15:4).

So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other (verses 9–10).

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram (verses 17–18).

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them" (Genesis 15:5).

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Romans 4:23–25).

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless (Psalm 84:11).

Abram viewed God? How do you view God when the waiting is long and his promises seem bleak?

6. Abram assumes God’s promise will be fulfilled through Eliezer, the head of his household. But then God instructs Abram to “look up at the sky” (verse 5). God not only tells Abram that his lineage will be as numerous as the stars, but also, in this, he draws Abram’s gaze upward. What do you think gazing at the stars did for Abram’s perspective? How can you “look up at the sky” in your daily life?

7. Reread Genesis 15:6 and compare it to Romans 4:18–25. What is God’s promise to us as Abram and Sarai’s descendants?

8. God commanded Abram to cut in half a heifer, ram, and goat—a pretty graphic mental picture! Yet it was common in Abram’s day for two parties to walk between animal halves while making a treaty. It was as if to say, “May I become like these animals if I don’t keep my part of the deal.”²² But in this vision, who passes between the animals—one party or two? What does this gesture say about God’s promises?

At the beginning of Genesis 15, God says, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward” (verse 1 NKJV). This is where we start. We start with “I am.” We start with remembering our “shield” and our “great reward.” Before looking at the promises, we look at the Promise Maker. If we focus on trusting in his promises before trusting in him, or receiving his promises more than receiving him, then we have missed it. Missed what? That the same God who spoke with, met with, and walked with Abraham wants to speak with, meet with, and walk with us. This is the ultimate promise—the greatest gift. And as we grow in relationship with God, we grow in our trust of his promises burgeoning in our lives.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ Our imperfect, doubting faith cannot prevent God from keeping his promises.
- ❖ God may call us to move outside of our comfort zone, but being "tent dwellers" will prepare us to be ready when God calls.
- ❖ God *never* forgets his promises, and our confidence in those promises is rooted in our relationship with him.

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught [Peter]. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31).

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord, thank you for grafting us into your promise of salvation. Thank you for the example of Sarai and Abram. Give us the confidence they had to call you "Adonai," Master, Lord, no matter the circumstances. And help us to remember that above all, the ultimate promise is fulfilled in relationship with you. In Jesus's name, amen.

Day Two: "Helping" God

RACKING UP CHARGES

Wouldn't it be nice if someone credited your charge card account? All month long you *rack-rack* up the bills, dreading the day the statement comes in the mail. When it comes, you leave it on your desk for a few days, not wanting to see how much you owe. Finally, you force yourself to open the envelope. With one eye closed and the other open, you peek at the number. What you read causes the other eye to pop open. "A zero balance!"

There must be a mistake, so you call the bank that issued the card.

"Yes," the manager explains, "your account is paid in full. A Mr. Max Lucado sent us a check to cover your debt."

You can't believe your ears. "How do you know his check is good?"

"Oh, there is no doubt. Mr. Lucado has been paying off people's debts for years."

By the way, I'd love to do that for you, but don't get your hopes up. I have a few bills of my own. But Jesus would love to, and he can! He has no personal debt at all. And, what's more, he has been doing it for years. For proof, Paul reaches into the two-thousand-year-old file marked "Abram of Ur" and pulls out a statement.

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness (1 Peter 2:24).

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? (Romans 4:1).

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God (Romans 4:2).

Abram and Sarai certainly had their share of charges on this statement. They were far from perfect. As we have seen, there were times when Abram trusted the Egyptians before he trusted God. He even lied, telling Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister. But Sarai had her failings as well. One of the most memorable occurred just after God made his covenant with Abram—when Sarai decided to take matters into her own hands.

“Sarai said to Abram, ‘See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai” (Genesis 16:2–3 NKJV). The result? Disaster.

1. Read Genesis 16 and write down the “charges” Abram and Sarai rack up. Why do you think Sarai decides to “help” God’s plan in this passage? Based on Abram’s response, what desires did he have to “help” God’s plan as well?

2. Think about a time when you took control of a situation instead of entrusting it to God. What were some of the results of that decision? Sarai believed taking over would fix the problem (see Genesis 16:2), and this gave her a false comfort. What false “comforts” tag along with control?

3. It had been ten years since Abram and Sarai had picked up and left all they knew to follow this promise of God. Sarai’s hope and patience were wearing thin, and she was beginning to cast blame. Who do you see her blame in Genesis 16? Who do you tend to blame when your dreams or plans don’t unfold as you had hoped?

4. Read Proverbs 3:5–7 and James 1:6–8. Which passage best describes Sarai in Genesis 16, and why? In Isaiah 26:3, how does the prophet encourage us to avoid doubt and control and have a heart of peace and trust?

Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me” (verse 5).

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you (Isaiah 26:3).

IN NEED OF A LITTLE GRACE

"So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:3-4). Abram and Sarai now have an heir, but it isn't the heir God intended. They have gone outside of God's plan, and soon things begin to unravel.

Hagar starts to despise Sarai. Sarai starts to despise Hagar. Abram is caught in the middle. The situation gets so bad that Abram finally gives up trying to work it out. "Indeed your maid is in your hand," he says to his wife. "Do to her as you please" (verse 6 NKJV).

In many ways, strange as it may seem, Sarai's humanness is refreshing. Should you ever need a reminder of God's tolerance, you'd find it in her story. If you ever wonder how in the world God could use you to change the world, just look at this couple. They made a lot of bad decisions. But Abram also made one for his family that changed everything: "He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own" (Romans 4:3 MSG). Because of this, God offered grace to both Sarai and Abram in spite of their faults and missteps. He credited their charge account and covered their debts.

My father had a simple rule about charge cards: own as few as possible and pay them off as soon as possible. So you can imagine my surprise when he put one in my hand the day I left for college. I looked at the name on the plastic. It wasn't mine; it was his. His only instructions to me were, "Be careful how you use it."

I went several months without needing that card. But when I needed it, I *really* needed it. On an impulse, I skipped class one Friday morning and headed out to visit a girl in another city, six hours away. Everything went fine until I rear-ended a car on the return trip. I can still envision the phone where I stood in the autumn chill to call my father. My story wasn't much to boast about. I'd made a trip without his knowledge, without any money, and wrecked his car.

"Well," he said after a long pause, "these things happen. That's why I gave you the card. I hope you learned a lesson." Did I learn a lesson? I certainly did. I learned that my father's forgiveness predated my mistake. He had given me the card before my wreck in the event that I would have one. He had provided for my blunder before I blundered.

Need I tell you that God has done the same? God knew that Abram and Sarai would falter. He knew they would someday need grace. And he knew that someday we, too, would need his grace.

5. What are the negative results of Sarai's decision to step outside of God's plan, both relationally and emotionally?

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress (Genesis 16:5).

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (15:6).

We all stumble in many ways (James 3:2).

6. How does Abram react to Sarai's decision? How do you think he should have responded? How can you help a friend or relative who is trying to take control or manipulate God's plans?

7. How did God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:6 provide for his "blunder before his blunder"?

8. God gives us forgiveness, knowing we will step outside of his desired plan, just as Sarai and Abram did. But he also gives us grace to grow in our faith along the way. Based on the following verses, how does our faith and trust in God grow?

Matthew 26:41: "Stay awake and pray for strength against temptation. The spirit wants to do what is right, but the body is weak" (NCV).

Mark 9:23–24: "Jesus said . . . 'All things are possible for one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" (ESV).

Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (NKJV).

Philippians 4:6–7: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all

comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (NASB).

Philippians 4:12–13: "I know how to live when I am poor, and I know how to live when I have plenty. I have learned the secret of being happy at any time in everything that happens . . . when I have more than I need and when I do not have enough. I can do all things through Christ, because he gives me strength" (NCV).

This story gives us a glimpse of what happens when we seek to go our own way instead of God's way. Sarai is left contempt and bitter. Abram is weary and consenting. Hagar is abused. Ishmael is left to die. We all have "Sarai moments"—times when we want life to go our way instead of God's way. We all have moments when we ask God to scoot over so we can sit in the driver's seat. This should make us love God even more—for we know that during such times he protected us from our own selves. He knew all the mistakes we would make—the "charges to the credit card"—yet he still chose us before the foundation of the world. No matter how much we foul up, God's plan of salvation is never thwarted, and his grace is never threatened.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ "Fixing" a situation by using our own means to move God's plan forward may give us a sense of comfort and control, but the results lead to disaster.
- ❖ God's forgiveness predates our mistakes, and his grace when we fail gives us the faith to grow in contentment with his plans.
- ❖ God often has to protect us from ourselves!

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord, we need help trusting you with all of our heart (see Proverbs 3:5–7). It's so easy to lean on our own understanding, and we don't want to be wise in our own eyes. Humble us and give us a heart that fears you. Thank you for your grace and love that predates all of our mistakes. Amen.

Day Three: Staying Hopeful

DREADFULLY ROUTINE

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him (Genesis 17:1).

By the time God makes his next appearance in Genesis 17, twenty-five years have passed since he first promised to make Abram and Sarai into a great nation. Abram is now ninety-nine, and Sarai is not much younger. She knits, and he plays solitaire. He has lost his hair. She has lost her teeth. And neither spends a lot of time anymore lusting for the other.

Twenty-five years. A lot has happened during that time. The couple has overcome scandal in Egypt. Their nephew Lot has been captured and rescued. Then there was that whole Hagar-and-Ishmael ordeal. But still, no son has been born, no promised heir.

For Abram, whose name meant “exalted father,” the conversations must have become dreadfully routine.

“Say, what is your name?”

“Abram.”

“Oh, ‘exalted father’! Wow, what a great title. Tell me, how many sons do you have?”

Abram would sigh. “None.”

Occasionally, I’m sure he’d think of God’s promise and give Sarai a wink. She’d give him a smile and think, *Well, God did promise us a child, didn’t he?* And they’d both chuckle at the thought of bouncing a boy on their bony knees.

God was chuckling too. With the smile still on his face, he began getting busy doing what he does best—the unbelievable. But first he had to change a few things, beginning with their names. “I am changing your name from Abram to Abraham,” he said, “because I am making you a father of many nations. . . . I will change the name of Sarai, your wife, to Sarah. I will bless her and give her a son, and you will be the father” (Genesis 17:5, 15–16 NCV).

Abram, the father of one, would now be Abraham, the “father of a multitude.” Sarai, the barren one, would now be Sarah, the “mother of nations.” It was another assurance from God that the promise would be fulfilled. Somehow, the couple chose to believe it and never give in to doubt.

1. Spend some time reading Genesis 17. This is the fourth time, during a twenty-five-year span, that the Lord visits Abram, and he opens this visit with the command, “Walk before me faithfully and be blameless” (verse 1). What does this mean?

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations” (verse 4).

2. If you were in Sarai's place, how would you have reacted to this command to walk before God after twenty-five-years of waiting? How does Abram react? What can we learn from his obedience (see verses 23–27)?

3. In Isaiah 40:31 the prophet writes, "Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength" (NKJV). What is the promise of waiting/hoping in the Lord? What lessons have you learned during your seasons of waiting?

4. According to 2 Peter 3:8–9, "With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness" (MSG). What does this verse say about God's timeline versus our own? How should we view God's timing?

THE UNWANTED AND OBNOXIOUS GUEST

Ah, *doubt*. He's a nosy neighbor. He's an unwanted visitor. He's an obnoxious guest. Just when you are all prepared for a weekend of relaxation . . . just when you pull off your work clothes and climb into your Bermuda shorts . . . just when you unfold the lawn chair and sit down with a magazine and a glass of iced tea . . . his voice interrupts your thoughts.

"Hey, Rebecca. Got a few minutes? I've got a few questions. I don't mean to be obnoxious, Bec, but how can you believe that a big God could ever give a hoot about you? Don't you think you are being presumptuous in thinking God wants you in heaven?"

"You may assume you are on pretty good terms with the man upstairs, but haven't you forgotten that trip in Atlanta? You think he won't call your cards on that one?"

"How do you know God gives a flip about you, anyway?"

On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. . . . And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him (Genesis 17:23, 27).

When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind (James 1:6).

*You, dear children, are from God
(1 John 4:4).*

*He predestined us for adoption
to sonship (Ephesians 1:5).*

*We are heirs—heirs of God and
co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17).*

*Yet he did not waver through
unbelief regarding the promise of
God, but was strengthened in his
faith and gave glory to God, being
fully persuaded that God had power
to do what he had promised
(Romans 8:20–21).*

Got a neighbor like this? He'll pester you. He'll irritate you. He'll criticize your judgment. He'll kick the stool out from under you and refuse to help you up. He'll tell you not to believe in the invisible yet offer no answer for the inadequacy of the visible.

He's a mealy-mouthed, two-faced liar who deals from the bottom of the deck. His aim is not to convince you but to confuse you. He doesn't offer solutions; he only raises questions. Don't let him fool you. Though he may speak the current jargon, he is no newcomer. His first seeds of doubt were sown in the Garden of Eden in the heart of Eve. He undoubtedly worked hard to sow those same seeds in the hearts of Sarah and Abraham.

But Sarah and Abraham never gave up trusting God. Although their get-up-and-go had got up and gone, and all they had was a Social Security check and a promise from heaven, they decided to trust that promise rather than focus on the problems. As a result, the Medicare couple were the first to bring a crib into the nursing home.

5. We have an enemy who loves to steal away our hope. When we listen to his voice, we call ourselves names like *forgotten, unlovable, unimportant*. More than likely, Abraham and Sarah felt this way during their twenty-five years of waiting. But then they listened to God's names for them—*Abraham* meaning "father of many," and *Sarah* meaning "princess." Read 1 John 4:4, Ephesians 1:4–5, and Romans 8:17. What does God call you? How does this breathe new hope into you?

6. God's plan is so outlandish that Abraham asks, "How could I become a father at the age of 100 . . . and how can Sarah have a baby when she is ninety years old?" (Genesis 17:17 NLT). Yet in spite of how crazy the plan sounds, he and Sarah never give up trusting God. Read Romans 4:18–21. What do these verses say about their faith?

7. Abraham is clearly in disbelief that Sarah will give birth to a son at such an old age. So he asks God to bless Ishmael, thinking that he *must* be the rightful heir after all. How does God respond (see

Genesis 17:19–20)? What does this say about God’s generosity and grace even when we misunderstand or doubt his plan?

8. What doubts are you hearing these days? Write them down, and then beside them write out these promises: 2 Peter 3:8–9, Deuteronomy 7:9, 2 Thessalonians 3:3.

In Hebrews 11:13, the author writes that the greatest biblical heroes “died in faith, not having received the promises” (NKJV). Sometimes we won’t see God’s promises unfold during our lifetime. Other times, it may take only a matter of minutes. Regardless, in seasons of doubt we must remember that God doesn’t need an alarm clock. He hasn’t dozed off or forgotten his plan for our lives. He is faithful, and his timing is perfect. May we, like Abraham and Sarah and all the heroes of faith, trust in God regardless of promises seen or unseen.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ God’s timeline is not our own, and we cannot measure his faithfulness by our clock or calendar.
- ❖ It is the enemy’s goal to confuse us, raise questions in our minds about God’s plans, and lead us into doubt.
- ❖ Our trust needs to be in God and God alone, or we will lose sight of him and sink into hopelessness when we grow impatient waiting on his plan.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Thank you, Lord, that your timing is perfect. You are never late to fulfill your promises. Help us to focus on you, on your faithfulness, and to keep our eyes fixed on your love and grace. May we grow in faith as we wait expectantly for what you are going to do in our lives. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac” (Genesis 17:19).

He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

The LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God (Deuteronomy 7:9).

The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Day Four: Promise Fulfilled

UNEXPECTED VISITORS

With God all things are possible
(Matthew 19:26).

*Abraham looked up and saw
three men standing nearby*
(Genesis 18:2).

*Sarah laughed to herself as
she thought, "After I am worn out
and my lord is old, will I now have
this pleasure?"* (verse 12).

*So she lied and said,
"I did not laugh"* (verse 15).

Sarah's name isn't the only thing God changes in her life. He soon changes her mind. He changes her faith. He changes the number of her tax deductions. He changes the way she defines the word *impossible*. But most of all, he changes her attitude about what it means to trust in him. It begins one day when three visitors arrive at her tent.

Abraham sees them first. He runs to greet them and then goes to find Sarah. "Quick," he says, "get some flour and bake some bread." Sarah does so, but as she kneads the dough in the tent, she does some eavesdropping as well. "I will surely return to you about this time next year," she hears one visitor say, "and Sarah your wife shall have a son" (Genesis 18:10 ESV).

When Sarah hears the news, a cackle escapes before she can contain it. Her shoulders shake, and she buries her wrinkled face in her bony hands. She knows she shouldn't laugh. It's not kosher to laugh at what God says, for this visitor indeed is the Lord speaking to her. But just as she catches her breath and wipes away the tears, she thinks about it again—and a fresh wave of hilarity doubles her over.

1. Spend some time in Genesis 18:1–15. Why do you think Sarah laughed? What emotions were behind her laughter (doubt, joy, shock)? Use the context and history you know to support your thoughts.

2. Why do you think the Lord asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" in verse 13? Usually when God asks a question, he is communicating a lesson. What lesson is he teaching Sarah?

3. Why does Sarah lie about laughing? How do you see her attitude toward God change from verse 12 to verse 15? Why does it change?

4. God changes the way Sarah defines the word *impossible* and changes her attitude about what it means to trust in him. When was a time God did this to you? How did he change the way you trusted him? How has he opened your eyes to the impossible?

THE LORD PROVIDES

Later on, after the visitors have left, Abraham looks over at Sarah—toothless and snoring in her rocker, head back and mouth wide open, as fruitful as a pitted prune and just as wrinkled. And he cracks up. He tries to contain it, but he can't. He has always been a sucker for a good joke.

But one year later, it's God who has the last laugh. "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him" (Genesis 21:1-2 ESV).

Sarah and Abraham's name for God was *Jehovah-jireh*, which means "the Lord who provides." It's a bit ironic, perhaps, that they would call God *provider*, given the fact the couple had been well provided for already before their trek to Canaan. They had lived in a split-level tent with a four-camel garage. Life was good in Ur.

"But life will be better in Canaan," Abraham had told Sarah and the rest of the family. So off they had gone. When she had asked, "Where will we live?" Abraham had answered, "God will provide." And God did.

When they later got caught in an Egyptian scandal, the family wondered, "How will we get out?" Abraham assured them, "God will provide." And he did.

When they split up the land and nephew Lot took the grassland and left Uncle Abraham with the rocks, the family wondered, "How will we survive?" Abraham knew the answer: "God will provide." And he did.

And when Abraham and Sarah stood next to the empty crib, and she wondered how she'd be the mother of nations, he'd put his arm around her, whispering, "The Lord will provide." And God did.

Were Sarah to hear Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:3 about being poor in spirit, she could give a testimony. "He's right," she would say. "I do things my way, I get a headache. I let God take over, I get a son. You try to figure that out. All I know is I am the first lady in town to pay her pediatrician with a Social Security check."

Abraham and Sarah had truly learned that God provides. But what God would ask them to do next must surely have tested their trust in him once again.

Lord GOD . . . there is nothing too hard for You (Jeremiah 32:17 NKJV).

To this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided" (Genesis 22:14).

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).

*God has brought me laughter,
and everyone who hears
about this will laugh with me
(Genesis 21:6).*

5. Read Genesis 21:3–7. The name *Isaac* means “he laughs.” How would you describe Sarah’s laughter in this chapter (see verse 6) as compared to her laughter in Genesis 18?

6. Sarah learned a lesson on how to be “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). What does being poor in spirit mean? Why does it bring blessing? In what ways are you poor in spirit?

7. “The poor in spirit are those who recognize they need God’s help.”³ How does seeing our need for God affect the way we live out our daily lives as compared to not seeing our need for God?

*My God will meet all your
needs according to the riches of
his glory in Christ Jesus
(Philippians 4:19).*

8. *Jehova-jireh* means “the Lord will provide.” God provided for Abraham and Sarah every step of the way. All they had to do was trust in him. In the space below, write down a time in your past when God provided an answer to a worry or need. Now write down a worry of today, and next to it write down God’s name, *Jehova-jireh*. Take a minute to remind yourself that God was faithful in your past and will be faithful in your present.

God had once asked Abraham, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14 NKJV). In the question we find the answer—absolutely not. Approximately 2,000 years later, we find the same truth proclaimed about another promised child yet to be born. “For with God nothing will be impossible,” the angel said to Mary as he announced the birth of the Savior (Luke 1:37 NKJV). Are you gripped by worry? Plagued with doubt? If so, just remember that if God could do the “impossible” by giving a ninety-one-year-old woman a child and a teenage virgin a child, he can do the impossible in your life. And just as Sarah joyously laughed the day she held that impossible miracle in her weathered arms, may you joyously laugh today as you hold on to the incredible promise that *nothing is impossible with God*. Nothing.

*Everything is possible for one who
believes (Mark 9:23).*

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ When God provides the impossible, our understanding of his character and our trust in his faithfulness grow.
- ❖ Remembering how God has provided for us in the past will help us to trust him to be faithful in the present.
- ❖ God can do the impossible in our lives.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

We praise you, Lord, for your faithfulness in the past—for those promises you have fulfilled and those impossible needs that you have already met. Your love and care are beyond measure! Thank you that our needs for today are safely in your hands. Amen.

Day Five: A Test of Faith

THE MOST DIFFICULT COMMAND

It's hard to say which is more amazing: that Sarah became pregnant at ninety, or that she and Abraham at that age were still trying to conceive. Of all the gifts God gave them, Isaac was the greatest. But of all the commands God would give them, this one would be the hardest: "Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll point out to you" (Genesis 22:2 MSG).

The Bible doesn't tell us what was running through Abraham's mind when he heard this command. It doesn't tell us Sarah's reaction as she said goodbye to her son. All we know is that Abraham saddled the donkey, took Isaac and two servants, and traveled to the place of sacrifice. When he saw the mountain in the distance, he instructed the servants to stay and wait. And he made a statement that is worthy of special note: "Stay here with the donkey. My son and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you" (verse 5 NCV).

Look at Abraham's confident "we will come back." As the writer of Hebrews would later note, "Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19 NLT).

She added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (Genesis 21:7).

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied (22:1).

Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac (verse 3).

*God cannot be tempted by evil,
nor does he tempt anyone
(James 1:13).*

1. Turn to Genesis 22. In verse 1, we read that “God *tested* Abraham” (NKJV, emphasis added). What does it mean to “test” one’s faith? Note that God never *tempts* our faith, only tests it (see James 1:13). What is the difference between testing and tempting?

*These have come so that the
proven genuineness of your faith . . .
may result in praise, glory and
honor when Jesus Christ is revealed
(1 Peter 1:7).*

2. Read 1 Peter 1:7. Describe a time when you think the Lord was testing your faith. How was your faith “refined by fire” during that test?

3. In Sarah and Abraham’s story, just when the waiting and trials are over—just when life is feeling good again with their promised son, Isaac—God sends the hardest test yet. Why did God test Abraham’s faith? Hadn’t Abraham proved faithful enough?

*By faith Abraham, when God tested
him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice
(Hebrews 11:17).*

4. Read Hebrews 11:17–19. How does the author say Abraham reacted toward God during this trial of faith? What can we learn from his example?

GIVING EVERYTHING BACK TO GOD

Up the mountain the father and son go. “Where is the lamb we will burn as a sacrifice?” Isaac asks at one point (Genesis 22:7 NCV). One wonders how the answer made it past the lump in Abraham’s throat. “God will give us the lamb for the sacrifice, my son” (verse 8 NCV). Jehovah-jireh, the Lord will provide.

Abraham ties up his son. He places him on the altar. He raises the knife . . . and then an angel stays his hand. God has interrupted the sacrifice and spared Isaac’s life. Abraham hears a rustling in the thicket and sees a ram caught by his horns in a bush. He offers it as a sacrifice and gives the mountain a name: Jehovah-jireh, the Lord provides.

*He went over and took the ram
and sacrificed it as a burnt offering
instead of his son (Genesis 22:13).*

In the New Testament, we find Jesus reaching out to parents of stricken children. The Canaanite mother. The father of an epileptic boy. Jairus. They held one end of their rope in one hand and reached toward Christ with the other. In each case, Jesus responded. His consistent kindness issues a welcome announcement: God heeds the concern in a parent’s heart.

After all, our kids were his kids first. “Don’t you see that children are God’s best gift? the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?” (Psalm 127:3 MSG). Before our children were ours, they were his. Even as they are ours, they are still his. We tend to forget this and regard our children as “our” children, as though we have the final say in their health and welfare. We don’t. All people are God’s people, including the small people who sit at our tables.

Wise are they who regularly give what they have received from God back to him. This is exactly what we see in Sarah and Abraham’s lives. They were willing to withhold nothing from God and entrust him with the very life of the one they had waited so many years to receive. Their example shows us that God rewards us when we do the same.

5. Think of a gift that God has given to you that you cherish deeply. If God asked you to return this gift to him tomorrow, how would you respond?

6. In Matthew 6:21 Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” If we aren’t careful, we can allow our gifts to outweigh the Gift-giver. Do you have any earthly gifts that you treasure too much? If so, how can you reach a place where you view God as the ultimate treasure and not the gifts he gives to you?

7. A thousand years after Abraham, the temple in Jerusalem would be built on Mount Moriah. Although the Bible doesn’t specify, many scholars believe the temple and the place where Abraham offered the sacrifice of Isaac were the same location. If that is the case, what would be the significance of the shared location (see Genesis 22:14)?

Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus’ feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter . . . was dying (Luke 8:41–42).

Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son (Genesis 22:12).

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–20).

Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Hebrews 13:16).

Abraham was now very old, and the LORD had blessed him in every way (Genesis 23:1-2).

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (50:20).

8. Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac was an act of worship—an offering to God of his absolute best, and his giving back to God what was rightfully the Lord’s in the first place. How can we likewise sacrifice our most prized possessions to God in a physical and spiritual sense?

God responded to Abraham’s faithfulness with these words: “Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:16-18).

In the end, the Lord blessed Sarah and Abraham for their trust in him. Yes, Satan had used an empty crib to stir up tension and dissension and doubt in their household. Sarah could have easily served as the enemy’s *prima facie* evidence as to why a person could never trust God. But instead, as we have seen, she modeled just the opposite. Her story has ever since instructed millions that God saves the best for last.

Other examples stand out in the pages of the Bible. When Daniel and Jerusalem’s best young men were led into captivity, it appeared to be a victory for Satan. Hell’s strategy was to isolate the godly young men. But again the plan boomeranged. Daniel was soon asked to serve in the king’s court. The very man Satan sought to silence spent most of his life praying to the God of Israel and advising the kings of Babylon.

Peter is another example. Satan sought to discredit Jesus by provoking Peter to deny him. But the plan backfired. Rather than be an example of how far a fellow can fall, Peter became an example of how far God’s grace extends.

Or consider Paul. Satan hoped the prison would silence his pulpit. It did, but it also unleashed his pen. The letters to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians were all written from a jail cell. Can’t you just see Satan kicking the dirt and snarling his lips every time a person reads those epistles? He helped write them!

Every time Satan scores a basket, the other team gets the points.

Sarah’s story tells us that God always keeps his promises. It shows us that God gives grace to those in need of it. It reveals that God stays with us and works in our lives even when we try to move against his will. And it shows us that he will care for us when we entrust to him the gifts that he has given to us.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ Times of testing refine our faith, making it genuine, and allow us to give God glory, honor, and praise.
- ❖ Our willingness to give God what we value the most is an act of worship that God will bless.
- ❖ We know our hearts are right toward God when he is more valuable to us than any treasure he gives us.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Everything we have is yours, Lord. We love and care for your treasures, but we recognize that they pale in comparison to you. Help us to worship you by having hearts that are willing to give you our all each and every day of our lives. Amen.

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

Understand, therefore, that the LORD your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands.

DEUTERONOMY 7:9 (NLT)

For Further Reading

Selections throughout this lesson were taken from *No Wonder They Call Him Savior* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986); *The Applause of Heaven* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); *In the Grip of Grace* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996); *Great House of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997); *Six Hours One Friday* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004); and *Fearless* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

Notes

1. Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 30.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 32
3. *The ESV Global Study Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), note on Matthew 5:3.

