

**He Said . . .**



**She Said**



# She

*To my beloved Eric for believing in me;  
to my treasure Diana for making me laugh;  
and to my faith big brother Todd  
for kicking me in the skirt to write.*

# He

*To Michelle, Eric, & Diana*

**He Said . . .**



**She Said**



**Biblical Stories from a Male  
and Female Perspective**

**Michelle Kallock Knight  
and Todd Outcalt**

  
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## Abraham and Sarah

Genesis 15—24

In Genesis we discover how God chose to be connected to a particular people. God chooses Abraham and Sarah, not because they are perfect, but because they are faithful servants, willing to migrate to a new land. God offers this couple a star-filled sky of descendants and a land of their own in return for this covenant obedience.

God's call beckoned Abraham and Sarah to leave behind the city of Ur—an ancient city located on the Euphrates River (Iraq)—and travel to Canaan (Israel), a marginal land located along the Mediterranean Sea. Through Abraham and Sarah we get a glimpse of this ancient world of nomadic herdsmen, tribal alliances, polygamous marriages, and child sacrifice.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is our family story—a story shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Each of these monotheistic faiths traces its genealogy and history back to this couple. The large themes in their story—who they were, how God related to them, and the promises God made long ago—remain as important and significant today as they were in the Middle Bronze Age (2200–1550 B.C.E.) in which they lived.

*Welcome to our family history!*



## She Said

*Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.*

—Genesis 16:1a (NIV)

Reading the story of Abraham and Sarah's infertility brings out my deep compassion for these lonely parents-to-be. How ironic that a very private issue such as sexuality and fertility has become public theological discourse for centuries and is the "birthing" point of three major world religions! Sadly, I know too many couples within my family and church community who have struggled with infertility, premature births, death of their infants and toddlers, costly fertility treatments, or the long process of waiting to adopt a child.

The inability to conceive a child—for women and men—can feel like a deeply personal failure. A sperm and an egg are, after all, very personal things. These smallest of cells carry the deepest, most secret parts of our genetic code. Inability to conceive impacts a person's sense of womanhood or manhood and can therefore influence a person's identity, strength, virility, and vitality. Multiply our contemporary sensibilities on this subject a thousandfold for Sarah and Abraham, because they lived in the era when a woman was *only* worth something if she produced a male heir for her man. *Ouch. Poor Sarah.*

Her man wasn't just your average nomadic herdsman in the community—he was a businessman and a leader. People looked to Abraham *and* his wealth and therefore, by association, looked to Sarah for leadership as well. I wonder: Did Sarah have a diminished self-worth? Did she have the support of her loyal husband or draw stamina from her women friends? The way she held her head up amid the whispers of other folks is amazing!

Abraham never leaves Sarah. He could have dumped her for a newer, younger model of femininity and fertility. After all, in those ancient times the blame for infertility rested on the woman. Still Abraham keeps Sarah, and together they wait and wade through the promises of God even with the reality of infertility.

A present-day story might help: a wife begged her spouse to stop having sexual intercourse with her at a decisive point in their marriage.

Her reason? Not what you might think. This dedicated wife and mother was bone-tired and heart-weary of burying their dead babies. Only two of her many pregnancies ever made it to live births. Thus she hoped to avoid any more sorrow by not participating in the act of procreation. She was like an old-school Catholic lady in her upbringing, taught by her church that any form of birth control was not an option. How sad! This issue finally tore this couple apart and led to their divorce.

The immense grief of losing a child is a difficult hurdle for any parent. I weep with Sarah in her struggle and in her silent losses, because scripture says she is barren and thus cannot become pregnant nor bear a child (Gen. 11:30). Abraham's generation considered this condition "a curse or affliction sent by God (Gen. 20:18), primarily because procreation was considered to be both a commandment and a blessing (Gen. 1:28; 9:7; Ps. 127:3–5).

As a mother I, too, suffered through pregnancy loss. The pain and disappointment are difficult parts of grieving and loss but can be healed by God's grace. I am a living testimony to this healing as well.

Keep in mind, adoption was not an option in Abraham and Sarah's time. A child needed to be "fruit" of the man's loins to be an heir. Surrogate mothering, the option Sarah offers and Abraham agrees to, is the closest thing to our modern-day adoption. Sex with a female slave—who then bears the children of the master—was commonplace and was another way for the married wife to retain her stature in the culture.



## He Said

*The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."*

—Genesis 18:13–14

The story of "father Abraham" is actually a narrative about two people—an elderly married couple who had profound faith in God. Each

time I read the Genesis narrative about Abraham and Sarah (who were originally Abram and Sarai) I discover new insights about the nature of faith, as well as questions about marriage, parenting, and laughter.

As a man, I am in awe of Abraham's complete trust in God. God told Abraham to move to a new country, and Abraham moved. God told the childless Abraham that he would have a son, and Abraham believed. When God asks Abraham to offer up his son on the altar, Abraham moves in obedience.

I am also aware that at every juncture of this narrative, Sarah enters the picture—the mother of faith, the one who made it all possible. Sarah is mentioned throughout the narrative—sometimes as an equal partner with Abraham, sometimes not—but always she is essential to the outcome. I wonder: Since Sarah would actually give birth to the child of promise, why isn't she lifted up as the exemplar of faith? This seems odd to me.

Men are often at a loss to adequately explain or accept the great power and potential of women. Only a woman can carry a child in her womb. Only a woman can birth new life. Only a woman can carry the promise to its fruition in birth. It has always been so.

In our time, the faith Abraham and Sarah exhibited (Gen. 12—24) has many and far-reaching implications.

For example, many married couples in the United States have difficulty conceiving a first child. We have reasons for this. First, people in general are marrying later in life. Many women feel their "biological clock" ticking as they build a career and stability into their lives. Some couples don't bring children into their family's planning until later, when the "receptivity" to conception is past its peak—for both the man and the woman.

Still the story of Abraham and Sarah continues to hold out the great hope for humanity: that every child is a child of promise and that these promises are not easily conceived, carried, or birthed. The older we are, the more miraculous a birth seems. Likewise, great responsibility comes with the child of promise, as both Abraham and Sarah discover. When have parents not discovered this truth for themselves? The birth is actually much easier than the parenting!

As a man, I am in awe of Sarah. I am also in awe of Abraham. In both Sarah and Abraham I see a great faith, a great trust, and an astounding hope that has stretched down through the centuries and touched me, too.



## She Said

*Sarah laughed within herself, “An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?”*

—Genesis 18:12 (The Message)

Sarah laughed at God and lived. That gives me hope because I have often (in my most human sin-filled moments) laughed at God’s plans for me and wondered if there would be divine retribution some day. Laughing at God and living to tell about it is, indeed, humorous.

Sarah takes the joke further and names her waited-for son “laughter”! Isaac means *laughter*. This woman has guts! It is as if she laughs at God a second time, or perhaps she is laughing at herself.

Since we are made in the image of God, does this mean God has a funny bone too?

I think so. Holy laughter is something I’ve witnessed many times: during children’s sermons in worship or in gatherings where men and women laugh hard and fully in spite of the difficulties and tragedies they are facing. God is laughter’s spark, and often our difficulties or perspectives can change after a good chuckle.

Perhaps we take things too seriously. Maybe we need to laugh more. Here our Matriarch and Patriarch model not only obedience to the call but also laughter in the call itself. This laughter exemplifies, perhaps, a resistance to God’s work, or doubt, and reveals humor in the impossible predicament of having a child in old age.

Like children, Abraham and Sarah seem to know how to laugh. I hope we can, too.

I love labyrinths. Not long ago I introduced the labyrinth to a group of kindergarten students. Usually, walking a labyrinth is a very quiet, reflective, inner experience. It is, after all, a prayer tool. This experience with the kindergarten students was far from contemplative.

At first the kids thought that the large canvas labyrinth on the fellowship hall floor was a maze. “Not so,” I told them. “Mazes get you lost. A labyrinth will never get you lost because it has only one path into the center and the same path back out.”

Now these children were intrigued.

A few of them, my daughter included, pretended to be cars and made car noises while moving along the labyrinth path. Some

kindergarten students giggled and tickled each other as they moved along the journey to the rose at the center of the labyrinth. Others skipped, hopped, jumped, and ran along the path. They zoomed to the center and then back out again!

When I asked them what they liked the best about the labyrinth, the sentiment was unanimous—the turns! *Ha!*—I thought. If this had been a group of grownups they would have hated the turns and would have wanted a straighter path! (I know this because I have shared the labyrinth experience with adults, too.)

We take ourselves, our callings, and our lives too seriously. When we grow up, we often stop having fun. I wonder: Whatever happened to entering God’s kingdom like children at play on a labyrinth’s path—just another journey like Abraham and Sarah took?



## He Said

One central element of the Abraham and Sarah story is the role that laughter plays in the enterprise. The story revels in—among the serious aspects of the situation—a not-easily accepted levity. Large portions of this story are more akin to a joke than a drama.

Abraham was seventy-five years old when God first told him, “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2)—a promise that must have sounded ludicrous at the time. The same promise arrived twenty-four years later, when Abraham was ninety-nine (Gen. 17:1). God comes to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre and reveals that his wife, Sarah, will have a son. Sarah laughs at the idea (Gen. 18:11–15).

The element of laughter is seriously evident throughout. When the child of promise is born, he is named Isaac, which means *laughter* in Hebrew. So there we have it.

But what are we to make of it?

I think this narrative teaches us that faith is most alive, most effective, when it is evidenced by laughter and joy. I’m sure we’ve all seen our fair share of deadly serious believers—and they generally are not fun people. A dry, sour countenance rarely is a good testimony to God’s grace. People who frown as they worship and serve the Lord hardly exhibit the kind of joy we should expect from people who profess to know the living God.

I'm grateful for the laughter of Sarah, especially. Who can believe half the things God has promised us? Our faith, indeed, is wild, untamed, and at times, borderline ludicrous. A God who created both the whale and the dandelion? A God who promises to bless through the tough times? A God who holds out the sanctuary of a heavenly home, a new body, and a new world to come? Surely we can smile at such things—even laugh about them. Incredible!

Years ago, when I was a divinity school student, we used to swap jokes in the lunch room. This break time was always a source of support and camaraderie. Through the laughter we always found truth. I've never forgotten this one:

**QUESTION:** Do you know the definition of a Puritan?

**ANSWER:** A Puritan is a person who is bothered by the very thought that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time.

Amen! Sarah knew that.

I wonder what would happen if we didn't take ourselves so seriously? I wonder if, instead of worrying and struggling and positioning, the church might be different if we came together to laugh? Personally, I find laughter a wholesome and life-giving response to God. A great many situations and circumstances in our lives could be improved simply by laughing about them.

Yes, the world is a mess, with much suffering and hardship—all serious stuff. Abraham and Sarah's world fared no better. Still, Abraham and Sarah were people of laughter. They are our examples—our father and mother of faith. How might we use their laughter to transform our families, congregations, and communities through the power of joy?



## She Said

*God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah."*

—Genesis 17:15 (NIV)

What is in a name? Throughout the Bible several characters, through their calling by God and their commitment to God's causes, experience a change in their names. Today Hollywood actors and

actresses change their names because their professional union desires a marketable and unique face. A Hollywood name creates a brand.

In the world of the Bible, names are changed only after God messes in a person's life. The biblical world knows nothing about attention or achieving celebrity status!

Consider Saul and his persecution of the early church. His name change after the Damascus Road experience reoriented his life forever. Saul became Paul, who became a leader and defender of Christ's church. Paul's new name emphasized the new mission and purpose in his life—a life that God in Christ called him to follow!

Jacob was the younger trickster twin who duped his brother and everyone he met. Late one night Jacob, facing another encounter with his brother, Esau, wrestled with God. Injured in the process, Jacob received a new name: Israel. In a deeper reality this new name brought into being a whole tribe, a nation of people. A new people inherited the name that God gives—calling them to fulfill their mission.

This nation of people—Israel—originated from one woman, Sarah. What an honor for this matriarch that our Bible records her name! Recording and remembering the names of women personalities in the Bible is hit or miss. Many women are referred to by their relationship to a father, brother, or husband. Thanks be to God, Sarah is remembered as Sarah. She has her own name, her own place of importance, and her own identity.

A nation cannot be produced unless a woman's womb is involved in the production. Abraham's sperm is not enough to grow a star-filled sky of descendants. How amazing that, for centuries, the part Sarah played in God's plan was so important and significant that the Bible writers never forgot her name.

What amazes me even more is what happened to Sarai's name. Sarai became Sarah through God's intervention. Sarah is one of the few women to have a name change. How cool is that!? God's call came not just to the father of a nation and not just to the mother of a nation but to a married couple. God's call, and Abraham's and Sarah's obedience to that call, influenced this couple forever.

God changes two names. Never before and never since has a couple been affected in such a dramatic way. In this cooperative calling, name changing, and childbearing we can find God's promise and plan

for all couples. Here is the gem for you and me and our life partners. We are another link in the chain that connects Sarah and Abraham with their star-filled sky of descendants.

Think about it: Your name relates who you are and what you are about. Your name is more than your identity. Your name can also proclaim your mission statement, your life purpose. For couples, your partnership is a promise of God's blessing, which you share together.



## He Said

Here's a novel idea: People who have faith must be willing to move!

Well, it's not a novel idea, really. It's an old idea—as old as Abraham and Sarah, as old as the Israelites traveling out of Egypt, and as old as Paul sailing by ship across the Mediterranean to share the gospel of Jesus with the Gentiles. People who have faith are called to a life of movement, not a life of pew-sitting and waiting for the Lord's return.

As a man, I find certain elements of the Abraham and Sarah story to be most unsettling—the idea of being itinerant and transient stands foremost among them. Why can't God just allow me to remain where I am, and as I am? Why this call to journey, to change, to grow from new experiences?

Deep down lies something elemental and important in this call to move. Abraham was called to leave his native land (Gen. 12:1) and to take up residence in a promised land. But this was just the first of many moves. Abraham and Sarah were always on the go. They found no opportunity for standing still, for leading a standard sedentary lifestyle.

What are we to make of this?

Consider your own journey. Where has God taken you? Where have you come from? How far have you come? Are you willing to undertake another journey with God, to tackle a big project, to climb a new mountain, to journey by faith into some uncharted wilderness of the heart or mind? That's what movement is about. That's faith in its essence. Faith is a verb—active, engaged. Our faith is a movement, not an organization.

Looking more deeply into the Abraham and Sarah narrative, I see that God was asking this couple to accept more than a physical journey from one land to another. In some ways, this was the *easiest* transition they made. God was asking Abraham and Sarah to take a journey that

would transform their marriage and would shape their love, their parenting, and their future together. God was asking them to take a journey that would transform the world.

God does not ask less of us!

Abraham and Sarah are such great examples because they were willing to go, to move, to be involved. They were not content to stay where they were, or as they were. They wanted what God was offering—but they realized that receiving the full blessing required faith. They had to commit. They were not the kind of people who offered excuses. They accepted and then moved on.

What about us?

When God asks us to go on a journey, to make a commitment, do we offer up excuses? I'm too busy (engaged in other pursuits). I'm too broke (don't have anything). I'm too tired (complacent). I'm too content (I like where I am). We have all offered these common responses to ourselves or to God. Or have we grown into patterns of faith and behavior that offer us no new insights or directions, so that, when God does ask us to step out in faith, we can't even recognize the call?

These are large issues—and all are represented in the Abraham and Sarah narrative.

Father Abraham? Mother Sarah? Thank God they were willing to go. They were willing to trust. They were willing to serve. They were willing to give.

May we be willing to follow in their footsteps!

## DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Share how your child(ren) or lack of child(ren) has contributed positively or negatively to your sense of worth as a person.
2. While God may not have asked you to change your name, how has either the reception of your spouse's name or a nickname been formative or not formative to your sense of identity as a child of God?
3. Share a story that inspired you to learn to laugh at yourself.

4. Where have you experienced God's call to change (employment, location, a decision), and how has it affected your relationship with God?
5. Talk about how faith or the lack of faith affects the promise of being a parent.
6. Take a sheet of blank paper and draw a "map" of your faith journey—including high or low experiences, decisive moments, and the like. Share with your group where and how God has moved along with you.