

October 21

Lesson 8 (NIV)

THE BIRTH OF THE PROMISED SON

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Luke 1:26–38](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Genesis 18:9–15](#); [21:1–7](#)

GENESIS 18:9–15

⁹ “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

¹⁰ Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

GENESIS 21:1–7

¹ Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”



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KEY VERSE

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised.—[Genesis 21:1](#)

GOD'S WORLD AND GOD'S PEOPLE

Unit 2: God Destroys and Re-creates

LESSONS [6–9](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Explain how the birth of Isaac fits the larger framework of Abraham's covenant.
2. Discuss ways that the manner in which God fulfilled the promise required patience on the part of Abraham and Sarah.
3. Identify situations in which their own faith has been challenged by God's apparent delay in fulfilling his promises.

LESSON OUTLINE

[Introduction](#)

- [A. Slow and Steady](#)
- [B. Lesson Context](#)
- [I. Human Impossibility \(GENESIS 18:9–15\)](#)
 - [A. God Promises \(vv. 9, 10\)](#)
 - [B. Sarah Doubts \(vv. 11–15\)](#)

Sarah's Laugh

II. Divine Reality (GENESIS 21:1-7)

A. Promise Fulfilled (vv. 1-5)

Rite of Passage

B. Sarah Praises (vv. 6, 7)

Conclusion

A. Remember to Say "Thank You"

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Aesop*Ee-sop.*

Eliezer*El-ih-ee-zer.*

Gomorra*hGuh-more-uh.*

Hagar*Hay-gar.*

Maasai*Mah-sigh.*

Sarai*Seh-rye.*

Sodom*Sod-um.*

Tanzania*Tan-zuh-nee-uh.*

Introduction

A. Slow and Steady

“The Tortoise and the Hare” is a fable attributed to the Greek sage Aesop (believed to have lived about 600 BC). In this tale an arrogant rabbit berates a tortoise for being so slow. Embarrassed, the tortoise finally challenges the hare to a race. The rabbit is so confident that he pauses on the course to allow the slow tortoise to catch up so that he will be forced to see the hare win.

The hare falls asleep, however, and during his nap the plodding tortoise passes him to cross the finish line first. While this story carries much wisdom, its moral is communicated in the still-famous punch line, “Slow and steady wins the race.”

“The Tortoise and the Hare” is still a popular subject of modern children’s books. Perhaps the most significant lesson speaks to the value of patience. Though some tasks take a long time, the solution is to not give up in the face of obstacles, but rather to pace oneself and keep moving forward.

Today’s lesson emphasizes the value of, and the need for, a “slow and steady” approach to faith. Whether we like it or not, God moves on his own timetable toward the fulfillment of his plans. Sometimes the pace seems to be frustratingly slow as we wait for God to act. And very often the finish line seems so far ahead that we can’t even see where we are going. Real faith calls us to keep moving steadily forward in the knowledge that victory will come if we don’t give up.

B. Lesson Context

We saw last week God’s promise to make Abram “a great nation” and make his “name great” ([Genesis 12:2](#)). Abram was to have many descendants who together would form a formidable and respected people group.

Working against this outcome, however, was the fact that Abram and Sarai had not been able to have children ([Genesis 11:30](#)). Abram may have assumed that God would correct this problem sooner rather than later. Support for this supposition may be seen in the fact that God told Abram on more than one occasion that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan, which at that time was occupied by other tribes ([Genesis 12:6, 7](#); [13:14–17](#); [15:18–21](#)).

Yet despite all these promises, nothing happened. Abram and Sarai prospered financially ([Genesis 13:2](#)), and their clan was feared for its military power ([Genesis 14](#)), but no son was born. How could God’s plan be fulfilled if his promise remained unfulfilled?

What Do You Think?

What are some things we can do to maintain faith when fulfillment of Bible promises seems too distant to happen in our lifetimes?

Digging Deeper

Considering the same issue in the lives of Bible characters, which one or two do you most relate to? Why?

Abram raised this point with God explicitly in [Genesis 15:1–3](#). That time when God appeared to him, Abram observed that it would be impossible for God’s plan to work: since Abram had no male heir, at death all his assets would revert to his oldest male servant, Eliezer, who was not related to him by blood ([15:2](#)). In response, God reaffirmed the promise ([15:4, 5](#)).

Yet more time passed, and no child came. In desperation, elderly Abram and Sarai decided to take matters into their own hands: they produced an heir through a surrogate mother, Hagar ([Genesis 16](#)). But then some 13 years later, with Abram nearing the century mark, God again made his intentions clear ([Genesis 17](#)). Abram (meaning “exalted father”) would be known as Abraham (“father of many nations”; [17:4, 5](#)). Abraham and Sarah (renamed from Sarai) would have many descendants, who would indeed conquer and possess the land ([17:6–8](#)). Having heard this same story many times before, Abraham could only laugh ([17:17](#)).

I. Human Impossibility

([GENESIS 18:9–15](#))

Our reading picks up near the beginning of a long episode that culminates in the deliverance of Abraham’s nephew, Lot ([Genesis 11:27](#)), from the destruction of the city of Sodom. Abraham is now 99 years old ([17:1, 24](#)). He and Sarah still have no children, and God has instructed them to circumcise all the men in their household as a sign of his plan to make a covenant with their heirs ([17:9–27](#)).

Somewhere along the line, God has decided to destroy the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Lot was then living ([Genesis 13:5–13](#)). Before he does this, however, he has a message for Abraham and Sarah. As our passage for today opens, the couple has been told several times over a period of many years that they will become the ancestors of a great and powerful nation. Working against God’s promise is the hard reality of infertility and menopause.

A. God Promises (vv. [9, 10](#))

[9](#). “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him.

“There, in the tent,” he said.

The word *they* refers to the “three men” of [Genesis 18:2](#). Their identity is often proposed to be the Lord and two angels, who disguise themselves in human form. They have stopped by the home of Abraham and Sarah to confirm once again God’s promise regarding a child.

To this point in the story, Abraham has hosted the three men by providing a meal and rest ([Genesis 18:1–8](#)). These are standard gestures of hospitality offered to traveling guests. The Lord apparently does not disclose his identity to Abraham until later, so Abraham may not realize at this point that he is talking to the Lord and his angelic messengers. The author of Hebrews seems to allude to this story when he urges, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” ([Hebrews 13:2](#)).

Sarah has assisted in the preparation of the food ([Genesis 18:6](#)), but has not shared in the meal. Instead, she has remained *in the tent* while the men ate outside. In that time, as in some cultures today, it is considered inappropriate for a married woman even to talk with men outside her family, much less

eat with them. The mysterious strangers' inquiry about Sarah is doubtless unsettling, since they should have no way of knowing the name of Abraham's wife.

10a. Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

The plural "they" of the previous verse changes to the singular *one of them*, which further changes to "the Lord" in [Genesis 18:13](#), below. If Abraham believes it inappropriate for strangers to ask about his wife, he must be shocked by this statement. Abraham is clearly an old man; even if his wife were half his age, she is past the point of childbearing.

If nothing else, the declaration might be taken as a sort of prophetic confirmation of what God has said already on previous occasions. Yet this time there is a key difference: while all of God's earlier promises about Abraham's descendants have oriented toward a distant future ([Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:1–21; 17:1–21](#)), this one is specific: *about this time next year* the promised son will come (compare [2 Kings 4:16](#)). The importance of this prediction is acknowledged in [Romans 9:9](#).

10b. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

We wonder if Sarah is intentionally eavesdropping, or if the message is intentionally spoken loudly enough so that it's impossible for her not to hear. The text doesn't say.

B. Sarah Doubts (vv. [11–15](#))

11. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

This verse underscores the human impossibility of what the stranger is saying. It has already been stated numerous times that Sarah is unable to become pregnant ([Genesis 11:30; 16:1; 17:17](#)). The physical challenge clearly lies with her, because Abraham was able to father a child with Hagar ([16:1–4](#)). Even if Sarah had already borne a dozen children, she is now nearly 90 years old ([17:17](#)) and well past menopause.

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

Whether Sarah realizes this is God talking or simply thinks their guest is offering a blessing on Abraham's household for the hospitality, this verse reveals the state of her own faith. Her earlier scheme to produce an heir through Hagar has already revealed her assumption that God's promise can only be fulfilled through some natural means ([16:1–4](#)).

Compounding the problem, she thinks, is the fact of Abraham's advanced age. The whole scenario has devolved, for her, into grim humor; all she can do is laugh in God's face, as Abraham himself had done a few months earlier ([Genesis 17:17](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are appropriate ways to respond to news that is hard to believe, yet is from a reliable source?

Digging Deeper

Categorize responses in the following texts as “appropriate,” “inappropriate but understandable,” or “inexcusably inappropriate”: [Judges 6:11–40](#); [Jeremiah 1:4–6](#); [Luke 1:8–18, 26–34](#).

13. Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’

The stranger, now revealed to the reader as not being a mere mortal, knows that Sarah has “laughed to herself.” His question implies feeling insulted.

14a. “Is anything too hard for the LORD?”

This rhetorical question states a premise of the Bible in a way that demands faith. The God who created the universe can do anything he wants and has proven so time and again. The question, then, is not whether God does what he says but whether Abraham and Sarah believe that he can and will.

What Do You Think?

What spiritual strategies can you adopt to not allow physical limitations to determine what God can and cannot do through you?

Digging Deeper

To what extent does (or should) the reality mixture of belief and unbelief in [Mark 9:21–24](#) influence your response?

14b. “I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

This restatement of the promise is not worded in such a way as to imply contingency on faith. The unconditional *I will return* asserts that this will be an occasion when God’s will cannot be negated by lack of faith (contrast [Luke 13:34](#)).

15. Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

Realizing that she has been caught red-handed, perhaps offending their guests and embarrassing her husband, Sarah whips up a quick lie to get off the hook. Her fear may simply reflect the social awkwardness of the situation. But perhaps it is driven by something deeper: this strange man clearly knows something about God and what God has promised them. The men leave ([Genesis 18:16](#)) with the prophecy unretracted. Sarah will have a son within about a year, whether she believes it or not.

What Do You Think?

What are some proper ways for a Christian to respond when embarrassed by a lack of faith?

Digging Deeper

In determining whether lying is ever a proper reaction, consider [Genesis 12:10–20](#); [20:1–12](#); [31:33–35](#); [Joshua 2:1–6](#) (compare [James 2:25](#)); [Matthew 26:69–75](#); [Revelation 21:8](#).

SARAH'S LAUGH

What makes us laugh? The answer seems obvious: when something is funny! But maybe not.

We've all heard nervous giggles, and we've seen villains in movies laugh at the diabolical plots they've conceived. Psychological research shows that no more than 20 percent of our laughs are in response to something that could be considered a joke.

Babies, as well as people born deaf and blind, laugh—demonstrating that laughter is not learned behavior. And most of us have experienced fits of uncontrollable laughter, usually in a group setting, to the point of saying (with a bit of exaggeration), “I nearly died laughing!” So the laughter of others can stimulate us to laugh, as can nervousness and fiendish glee, as well as the occasional good joke.

When Sarah heard the mysterious visitor's prediction that she would bear a son, she laughed, perhaps at the irony of what seemed to be such an impossible suggestion. Of course, she was looking at the idea from a human perspective. Even today, some people find it laughable to think that God performs miracles. But they are not viewing the world through the eyes of faith.

For those willing to set aside human wisdom, the appropriate response when God does the seemingly impossible is ... delight.

—C. R. B.

II. Divine Reality

[\(GENESIS 21:1-7\)](#)

Two interventions by the Lord are recorded between the two primary segments of today's lesson text. First, he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah ([Genesis 19:1-29](#)). After that, God corrects a situation brought on by Abraham's lack of faith ([Genesis 20](#)).

A. Promise Fulfilled (vv. [1-5](#))

[1, 2](#). Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.

Soon after the visit of the mysterious strangers, Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth at the age of 90 (see [Genesis 17:17](#)). This fact answers the rhetorical question of [Genesis 18:14a](#), above. Clearly, nothing is impossible with God! After decades of Abraham and Sarah's childlessness, God acts miraculously within the exact time frame specified.

[3](#). Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.

Both Abraham and Sarah had laughed when promised a child, reflecting their doubt ([Genesis 17:17; 18:12](#)). In response to Abraham's laughter, God directed that the child's name be *Isaac* ([17:19](#)), which

means “he laughs” when translated. Thus the child’s name serves as an enduring reminder of God’s faithfulness in the face of human doubt.

Isaac’s name thus speaks volumes. To his parents, it condemns their “we know better” impatience with God’s timetable. At the same time, the name symbolizes the great joy their son is bringing them. For Isaac himself, it serves as a lifelong reminder of his status as the promised child of the covenant ([Genesis 17:19](#)) and of his obligation to remain faithful to the God who has given him life.

4. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.

A year before Isaac’s birth, God had directed Abraham to seal the covenant by circumcising the male members of his household ([Genesis 17:9–14](#)). Further, God had commanded that Abraham’s future descendants also should be circumcised. This is a known medical practice in Egypt in Abraham’s time. Abraham may have first become aware of it during his brief sojourn there during a period of famine ([12:10–20](#)).

Circumcision in the current context is symbolic of the fact that God has promised to bless Abraham, and through him the world. That is to happen via the production of offspring ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). God’s earlier commands to Adam ([1:28](#)) and Noah ([9:1](#)) to populate the earth obviously involved natural sexual reproduction; and God’s covenant with Abraham assumes that his descendants will pass along not only Abraham’s bloodline but also his faith.

In this sense, circumcision is to serve as a powerful symbol of the passing of the blessings of the true God from one generation to the next. As Abraham’s descendants are circumcised a week after birth ([Genesis 17:12; 21:4](#)), they are literally, physically marked for God’s service while still in the cradle.

RITE OF PASSAGE?

Growing up in Minnesota in the 1950s, I couldn’t wait for my fifteenth birthday. That day I would be ready for a rite of passage: getting my driver’s license. Throughout the year before that birthday, my friends and I emotionally wrestled with the perennial rumors that the age of eligibility would be increased to 16 before we reached the magic age. Looking back, I suspect 15 was too early an age at which to entrust someone with such a responsibility.

Every society has rites of passage. For example, Maasai boys in Kenya and Tanzania begin a many-year initiation process with a night spent in the forest. The next day’s ceremony involves singing, dancing, drinking a concoction of various liquids, and eating large quantities of meat.

Then comes circumcision, the symbol of becoming men and warriors. They are not to cry out or even flinch, because this would show they are not brave warriors. The next 10 years are spent at warrior’s camp, learning skills in preparation for the senior-warrior ceremony, which also entitles young men to get married.

God’s intent for circumcision to Abraham was much different. Rather than being a rite of passage into adulthood, it was “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” ([Romans 4:11](#)). Today, circumcision for religious purposes is irrelevant ([Galatians 6:15](#)). What is important is circumcision of the heart ([Romans 2:28, 29](#)). But you may be surprised to learn that that is not a new thing for the new covenant era. See [Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4](#).

5. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

This verse is significant to Abraham's story for two reasons. First, it again stresses the miraculous nature of Isaac's birth, which occurred far beyond the time when his parents would naturally be able to have children. Second, it stresses the patience that God required of Abraham and Sarah. The two were age 75 and 65, respectively, when they departed Harran for Canaan (see [Genesis 12:4](#); [17:17](#)) with expectation of being made into "a great nation" there ([12:2](#)). But the two had to wait another 25 years to see the promise fulfilled. Their story is usually a model of persistent faithfulness; on a few occasions, however, they model the opposite.

B. Sarah Praises (vv. 6, 7)

6. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

Though Sarah had earlier laughed at God's promise, to her credit she praises him when she sees it finally fulfilled. Here again, the word *laugh* has more than one implication. God's prediction of the humanly impossible had previously provoked Sarah's laughter as an expression of doubt. Now she laughs with joy at God's fulfilling his promise. Sarah clearly intends to share her testimony with others, who will *laugh* with her as they share her joy and marvel with her at God's power.

What Do You Think?

How should the church as a body respond when God shows his faithfulness?

Digging Deeper

In what ways, if at all, should that response differ in the sight of unbelievers and fellow believers? Why?

7. And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Sarah now indicates the reason people will laugh in amazement with her. Clearly she had given up, coming to a point where she didn't believe it possible for God's promise to be fulfilled. Her words also reflect the social pressure she had been under for decades, living in a world where a woman's primary responsibility was providing male heirs for her husband. Whereas people had previously whispered about her shame, they can now rejoice with her for God's provision.



Visual for Lesson [8](#). Point to this visual as you ask, “What was a blessing you received that was so unlikely that it could only have come from the Lord?”

Conclusion

A. Remember to Say “Thank You”

People seem to have a natural tendency to take things for granted. “Please” is easy to remember because we use that word to help us get something we want. “Thank you” takes more thought because we already have what we want and are ready to move on. Many believers find the same scenario to be true of their relationship with God. We know how to ask with “please,” but don’t invest much time in saying “thank you.”

Sarah can serve as a good model for doing better on our thank-yous to God. Once her desire for a child was honored, she remembered to give God the credit—a special kind of “thank you.” This told the whole world how grateful she was for what the Lord had done for her.

Genuine faith always expresses itself in gratitude. Does yours?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us realize anew that you expect us to adopt your timetable, not the other way around. May times of your silence be times of increasing faith as we await your perfect timing. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

“With God all things are possible.”

—[Matthew 19:26](#)

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student

Into the Lesson

Say, “It is likely that all of us know at least one couple that has struggled with infertility. What are some occasions that may be especially difficult for a couple that is unable to conceive?” (*Potential responses: a baby shower, births to close friends, Mother’s Day.*)

After discussing the need for compassion and support, make a transition by pointing out that there are occasional “happy endings” when a child indeed comes along after many years of waiting and praying. Say, “Today’s lesson is about just such a happy ending.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “That’s Impossible!” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students to complete as indicated. After no more than one minute, call time, go over the answers, and discuss. Then ask, “What commonplace things do we experience today that were once considered impossible?” and/or “How have you seen God accomplish the impossible during your lifetime?”

Into the Word

Have students take turns reading aloud [Genesis 18:9–15](#); [21:1–7](#). Then divide the class into three groups, giving each group pen and paper. Instruct them to create journal entries that focus on a particular character in the story. Provide the following questions on handouts that you create.

Sarah’s Perspective Group: 1–With what was Sarah struggling? 2–Why did she laugh at the messenger’s news? 3–Why did she deny laughing? 4–Why did she feel free to laugh once Isaac arrived?

Abraham’s Perspective Group: 1–What was the only response Abraham made during the entire conversation with the messengers? 2–What is the significance of Abraham’s giving his son a name that means “laughter”? 3–What covenantal act did Abraham perform after Isaac was born?

Messengers’ Perspective Group: 1–What was the message they delivered? 2–How did the Lord feel about Sarah’s response? 3–Why was Sarah confronted?

After no more than 15 minutes, allow groups to share entries with the class as a whole. Then pose the following questions, pausing after each one for discussion. 1–Why had Sarah resigned herself to being barren? 2–Why did the messenger speak to Abraham knowing that Sarah would overhear the conversation? 3–Why did the messenger not respond directly to Sarah in verse 15? 4–Beyond the obvious biological reasons, how were Abraham and Sarah going to have to work together to see God’s promise fulfilled through them?

Option. Distribute copies of the “Bible Babies” activity from the reproducible page. Have students work in pairs to complete as indicated. As a transition to Into Life, ask, “How does God’s intimate knowledge of every human being, from the very moment of conception, change your understanding of how the Lord values you?”

Into Life

Say, "Today's Bible text describes the fulfillment of a promise from God in the midst of an impossible circumstance." Then, depending on the nature of your class, pose one or both of the following questions for discussion. 1—What do you desire from God that requires the seemingly impossible? 2—What promises from God do you especially depend on as you wait for the Lord's answer to your prayers? Encourage free discussion.

Option. Provide learners with pen, paper, and envelopes. Have them write short letters to themselves describing their hopes. When finished, have them put the letters in envelopes that they address to themselves. Collect the sealed envelopes; stamp and mail them a year from now so your learners can be reminded about how God has worked in their lives over the previous 12 months.