



WICKED  
WOMEN  
OF THE  
BIBLE

Ann Spangler

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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OF THE  
BIBLE

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# Introduction

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Before one word of the Bible was ever recorded, its stories and instructions were communicated orally. Though many modern cultures rely heavily on the written word, ancient cultures developed strong oral traditions in which information was handed down from generation to generation.

Certainly that must have been how the stories of the women in this book were first preserved, retold from generation to generation, perhaps around a campfire under starry skies. When the sun went down and their work was done, people shared a meal, recounting the events of the day and then telling the stories of their nation and tribe, regaling each other with memories populated by a colorful cast of characters—real people whom their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents had known.

From their earliest years, children would have thought of the stories of women like Abigail, Bathsheba, and Esther, not as some ancient chronicle, but as part of their own family history. A woman like Esther, for instance, may have been thought of as a cherished aunt rather than as an ancient queen from the distant past.

Some unsavory stories, like the ones about Jezebel or Samson's wicked girlfriend, Delilah, may have been reserved for later, to be told only after the children went to bed. Preserved with remarkable faithfulness because of a strong oral tradition, these and other stories eventually made their way into the Bible we read today.

In *Wicked Women of the Bible* I have done my best to reimagine the stories of some of the Bible's most fascinating women in order to bring them to life for contemporary readers. To do that I've relied on fictional techniques as well as on historical and cultural background information

to provide both color and texture. In doing so, I've done my best to stay close to the biblical text, so that today's readers will be able to understand the stories in much the same way as people who listened to them thousands of years ago might have.

One of the things that makes Scripture so believable is that these unsavory stories remain part of it. In truth, the Bible never attempts to clean up the stories or whitewash its characters. Even Sarah, a biblical matriarch whom the New Testament refers to as a holy woman, had her shadow side, wickedly abusing her servant girl Hagar and then throwing her out into the wilderness with no means to survive. And there are far more wicked characters, like Queen Jezebel or Herodias and Salome. If the Bible were merely a puff piece, surely several of these stories would not have made their way into the version we read today.

Why did God put them there? Why did he allow these unpleasant stories to be commemorated? For those who believe Scripture to be the inspired Word of God, these and other stories are in the Bible for a reason. In retelling some of these stories, this book will try to uncover what we can learn by exploring them.

Readers may also wonder why women like Abigail, Esther, and Ruth are included in a book about wicked women of the Bible. My aim has not been simply to highlight the stories of some of the Bible's worst women but also to explore the stories of those who might be considered "wicked good" or "wicked smart."

For anyone who wants to delve more deeply into their stories, I have indicated where they can be found in the Bible. Each story ends with a brief section entitled "The Times," which provides additional background information, as well as a section entitled "The Takeaway," which includes questions designed for individual and group Bible study.

The more time you spend with these and other stories from the Bible, the more you will realize that from beginning to end the Bible is the world's greatest storybook. Whether you are already familiar with its stories or whether you are reading them for the first time, I hope that *Wicked Women of the Bible* will whet your appetite for more, helping you to glimpse the goodness of God and the surprising ways he reveals himself in the pages of the Bible.

As always, it takes a village both to publish a book and to launch it

with any degree of success. I am grateful to David Morris, Zondervan's trade publisher, and to associate publisher Sandy Vander Zicht, both of whom enthusiastically supported the idea for this book when they first heard about it. As we discussed the shape it might take, David suggested that it might be interesting to use the word *wicked* in both its literal and ironic sense, an idea I found immediately appealing. As always, Sandy was able to bring her considerable editorial skills and experience to the project, providing guidance that has helped both to shape the book and to improve it in countless ways. I am thankful for her role as friend, encourager, and devil's advocate, a role that every good editor must play. When it comes to editorial help, I am also indebted to Verlyn Verbrugge for the considerable help he has rendered not just for this book for many of the books I have published over the course of my writing career. Since I am neither a trained theologian or a biblical scholar, I have come to rely on his expertise in these areas to make sure that what I have written is solidly grounded. Thank you, Verlyn, for your careful editorial eye for the help you have graciously rendered over the course of many years.

On the marketing side, I am also grateful for Alicia Kasen, senior marketing director of Zondervan trade books, and for her creative efforts to spread the word about this book. Gratitude also goes to my agent, Sealy Yates, who caught the vision for this book as soon as I proposed it. I am thankful for his continued efforts on my behalf and for his wise counsel, which I have come to rely on over the course of several years.

Even with the best support an author could wish for, it is likely that there are still weaknesses and deficiencies in the work. Whatever these may be, I take full responsibility for them. Despite the book's flaws, I hope readers will share my enthusiasm for these ancient stories and for the rich insights they continue to reveal to readers today.



CHAPTER 1

# *Wicked Lies*

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## THE STORY OF EVE

### How the First Woman Swallowed the First Lie

*The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

Jeremiah 17:9

*Bzzt, bzzt.* She swats the flies away but they keep on coming, too many to count. She has grown used to the constant annoyance, just one of many. Their favorite spot is around her eyes, where they gather to suck the tears away before she has time to shed them.

Still, Eve is a splendid creature, the most beautiful woman in the world, her husband says, enjoying his little joke. She has big honey brown eyes, smooth skin, and thick, dark hair that flows like a river down her back.

Eve has a memory, but it is not long. It swirls about her now, filled with images sharp and bright and shadows deep and long.

She knows what it is like to walk in God's garden, in paths that wind through green meadows and lead to still waters. When she is hungry, she merely reaches out a hand to pick the food that grows in lush abundance. Olives, dates, citrons, almonds, figs, grapes, and pomegranates so big it will take days to eat them.

She recalls what it is like to feel every sense satisfied, every need cared for. To walk with God in the cool of the day. To know the immensity of his love. He tells her she is made in his image. That she and her husband are to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the whole, wide world he has made. They are to be fruitful and multiply so they can care for his great creation.

He speaks to them of how he separated light from darkness and fashioned two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He tells of his delight in placing the stars on their track in the sky. To Eve they look like tiny pricks of brilliant light seeping through the canopy of night.

She listens in wonder as he speaks of how he made a home for her and Adam in the east of Eden, a garden paradise in which all kinds of trees grow—trees pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle

of the garden grows the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

She remembers, too, what Adam has told her. How God shaped him out of the dust of the ground. He can still recall the hot, sweet breath of God waking his soul to life. He loves to tell about the day God paraded all the animals in front of him—alligators, baboons, gazelles, skinks, parrots, crows, cheetahs, curlews, monkeys, macaws, pythons, bullfrogs, trumpeter swans, yaks, flying foxes, hummingbirds, egrets, elephants, lions, and great, strutting peacocks. God and Adam laughed long and hard as the most preposterous of his creatures passed by. The best part was that Adam got to name them all.

Indeed, Eve knows the scene well, almost as though she had been there even though God had not yet put Adam to sleep to draw her from his side. Perhaps a memory lingers from when the two had been but one.

Adam always reminds her that even among the most marvelous of the creatures God had made, none was found to be his match. So the Lord God caused him to fall into a deep slumber; and while he was sleeping, he had fashioned a woman from his side.

God's delight was evident when he presented her to Adam and heard him exclaim,

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”<sup>1</sup>

This is Eve's favorite part of the story. She loves to hear Adam tell the tale—how stunned he was to meet her. Her breath, he says, smelled like the fragrance of apples and her breasts were like clusters of fruit. Her mouth was the finest wine.

Eve and Adam. Adam and Eve. The two complete each other. She smiles as she recalls their life together in Eden.

She remembers, too, what she did not know at first—that there could be a place less perfect, a life less loving, a future less bright. That sin could lurk at your door, waiting for a chance to beat you down and shatter you into a thousand jagged pieces, each one a thorn and a barb.

Deceit, blame, want, shame, and terrible grief—all these and worse she has known.

She returns to her memories of what once was. She thinks of all the plants in paradise and of the luscious fruit they bore. The trees were the most delightful. Stately palms, gnarled olive trees, tremendous oaks, and fig trees perfect for playing a hiding game with Adam. But she especially loved the ones that grew in the center of the garden. One of them had bright green leaves lit up with tiny lights that danced inside. The other had deep purple leaves shot through with veins of red.

Why, she wondered, had God told them they were free to eat from any tree in the garden except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, warning them that death would surely follow if they did? What exactly was this death he spoke of?

One day, while Eve was thinking such thoughts, and while she and Adam were walking together in the center of the garden, a creature appeared. Not just any creature but one craftier than all the wild animals God had made. The serpent spoke in beguiling tones: “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” Why, he asked, would a good God deny them anything? Weren’t she and Adam the crown of his creation?

For the first time, it dawned on Eve that she might be lacking something, that God might be withholding something vital she needed to know. But she feared such thoughts and so she merely said, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent told her. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

To know what is good in every situation. To see the end from the beginning and everything in between. To be able to achieve a goal with flawless precision and absolute certainty, surely this was wisdom. Why would God want to keep this gift of power from her?

She turned to Adam as though to find an answer to her silent question, but he said nothing. They were near the tree now. Plucking a piece of fruit, she held it in her hand, delighting in the firmness of its flesh.

When nothing happened, she took a single bite and then another until she had eaten it all.

Then she plucked another piece and handed it to Adam, who ate it without the slightest protest.

Suddenly their eyes were opened, and they could see the wrong in each other's hearts. Ashamed of their nakedness, they sewed leaves from a fig tree to cover themselves.

Then Eve and Adam heard a sound they feared. God himself was walking in the garden. So they hid. "Where are you?" God called.

But who can hide from God?

"I heard you in the garden," said Adam, "and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."<sup>2</sup>

Then God, who already knew the answer to his question, inquired of Adam, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"<sup>3</sup>

Struggling to explain, Eve's husband spit out the truth, but not the whole truth. He began with an insinuation, blaming God for what he had done. Hadn't God given him the woman? Then he bent the consequences in Eve's direction, saying "The woman *you* put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then God turned to Eve and said, "What is this you have done?"

The question pierced her like a knife, cutting her heart in two. But she prevaricated, just as Adam had, refusing to bear the blame. "The serpent deceived me," she said, "and I ate."<sup>4</sup>

And then she cowered, her arms above her head as though to ward off blows.

But God merely turned toward the serpent, and said,

"Because you have done this,  
Cursed are you above all the livestock  
and all the wild animals!  
You will crawl on your belly  
and you will eat dust  
all the days of your life.  
And I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;

he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel.”

But that was not the end of it.  
Then God turned to the woman and said,

“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;  
with painful labor you will give birth to children.  
Your desire will be for your husband,  
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said,

“Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which  
I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’  
Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat of it  
all the days of your life.  
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground,  
since from it you were taken;  
for dust you are  
and to dust you will return.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s words struck like lightning in a sudden storm, flashing across the sky with startling clarity, showing them everything they had lost. The future loomed bleak and harsh before them.

As for God, he was grieved by what had happened, how the man and woman he had loved into being had failed to love him in return. He could not let Adam and Eve remain in the garden he had created just for them. For if they reached out their hand and ate from the Tree of Life, they would live forever in their sin and there would be no possibility of becoming other than what they were now, broken and bent by sin. So God banished them and placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.<sup>6</sup>

So Eve and her husband were barred from paradise, and the peace they had always enjoyed became like a dream they could barely recall.

They had traded wholeness for brokenness, health for sickness, calm for anxiety, prosperity for want, and harmony for strife. Instead of living in the brightness of God's presence, they lived alone in the dark.

But it was not completely dark. Though Eve and her husband had listened to the biggest lie of all, God had something more in mind for them than punishment. Even so, their lives unfolded just as God had said they would.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. With great anguish, she gave birth to three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth. The eldest became a murderer and the second his victim. As for Adam, he labored from morning until evening just to keep his family alive.

And as for God?

Fortunately for Eve and for Adam and for all the children who would become their descendants, God had seen the end from the beginning with everything in between. In his great love, and with absolute certainty, he had set a plan in motion to draw his people back to himself. This bold plan would take uncountable years and face unfathomable obstacles. But sooner or later it would be flawlessly achieved.

Of this Eve was sure, for hadn't God promised that from her would come someone who would crush the serpent's head? In his great wisdom God would provide a way for his children to come home to him.

## THE TIMES

Her story takes place before recorded time.

*Eve's story is told in Genesis 1–4.*

According to the worldview that prevailed among Israel's neighbors in the ancient Near East, the primary role of human beings was to serve the needs of the gods. They were to do the menial work the divine beings were tired of doing, especially the work of providing food for themselves.

By contrast, Genesis presents God as the one who not only creates the first human beings but who provides food for them by fashioning a garden paradise for them to live in. The garden Genesis describes isn't merely a flower garden or a garden filled with vegetables, but something

like a landscaped park with paths, pools, fruit-bearing plants and trees, and life-giving water flowing through it. It was a magnificent garden, the kind that might have adjoined a temple or a palace. The implication in Genesis is that the garden home of Adam and Eve adjoined God's residence in Eden.\*

Genesis also makes it clear that men and women, unlike the rest of the living beings God made, were created in God's image. That the gods planted images of themselves on earth would not have been a novel idea. Surrounding peoples believed that these images, which took the shape of idols, monuments, or even kings, were actual images of divinity, containing the god's essence, which enabled them to do the god's work on earth.

But Genesis presents only one God, and he is the Creator of everything. Instead of treating Adam and Eve as his slaves, God begins by lovingly providing for their needs and then treating them as his royal image bearers, telling them to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28).

Living in our broken world, it is hard to imagine all that Adam and Eve lost by giving into temptation and transgressing God's clear command. The immediate consequence of their act was to expose their shame. Prior to eating the fruit, they had nothing to hide. But now no amount of clothing could conceal the shadows inside.

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\* For an insightful commentary on Genesis and for more on why the Garden of Eden might be considered part of God's residence in Eden, see John H. Walton, "Genesis," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds: Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:10–38.

## THE TAKEAWAY

1. Imagine that you are the first woman or man and that you are living in the Garden of Eden. What do you think it would have looked like, smelled like, felt like?
2. In Eden, Eve must have had the perfect relationship with her husband. What do you think that first marriage was like in the beginning?
3. Have you ever disobeyed God because you didn't understand or agree with one of his commandments? What was the result?
4. In what ways would you say the image of God is most broken in people today? How do you think God wants to restore his image in people today?
5. Why do you think God planted Adam and Eve in a garden paradise? What did it say about his expectations for how the first humans were to tend his world, as expressed in Genesis 1:28?



CHAPTER 2

*Wicked Old*

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THE STORY OF SARAH

How a Ninety-Year-Old Got  
Pregnant and Set Tongues Wagging

*He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh.*

Psalm 2:4

Older than dirt. That is Sarah. Her skin hangs like sackcloth, wrinkled and rough. Yet hers is a face that still makes men look, so beautiful it once charmed kings.

You might think her a fool for all the non-stop laughter. Her body shakes with it. But she is no fool, only a woman who can't stop marveling at what God has done. Though her husband is more than a hundred years old and she not far behind, she's pregnant with his child. Who wouldn't find that funny? Two old sticks kindling a fire!

But then it comes—yet another sharp pain snaking down her leg. Ow! The added weight is hard to bear, and loose joints make her wonder whether she will topple over. Though the baby is so ripe she can hardly bend, she never complains. How could she since the Almighty has answered her prayers?

Sarah laughs again, this time because her baby is kicking. He's like a little rabbit whose feet thump softly against her belly. "It won't be long before I hold him in my arms," she thinks.

But how does she know it will be a son?

Sitting in a quiet corner of her tent, Sarah thinks back, remembering all the hurtful things that once were whispered behind her back. She remembers the bitterness she felt every time she heard the women cluck-clucking because God had not blessed her with children. Surely, they would say, Sarah must have done something exceedingly wicked for God to have closed her womb.

Her Egyptian maid Hagar was always the first to throw a stone. She claimed God had cursed Sarah\* because she had been unfaithful to Abraham when the two had travelled to Egypt. But what Hagar didn't disclose was that Abraham had asked Sarah to tell a lie to save his skin.

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\* God changed Sarai's name to Sarah and Abram's name to Abraham in Genesis 17 to signify their special relationship with him. For the sake of simplicity I have chosen to render her name as "Sarah" throughout the story.

The couple had fled the parched deserts of the Negev for the lush land of Egypt. Where better to escape a famine than in that place of rich abundance created by the Nile River's frequent flooding? In Egypt there were plenty of cucumbers, melons, garlic, and fresh fish to eat. But there was also a price to be paid. There always was.

Fearing what lay ahead, Abraham urged Sarah to tell the Egyptians she was his sister lest they decide to murder him in order to have her. And so she recited the lie—but not quite a lie, because Abraham was her half-brother.

As Abraham had feared, word of her beauty spread quickly until Pharaoh declared that he must have her for his own. After showering Sarah's "brother" with gifts of sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels, menservants, and maidservants—of which Hagar was one—clueless Pharaoh added Sarah to his harem.

Before visiting Pharaoh's bedchamber, Sarah had to look the part—to be transformed into an Egyptian beauty. Fortunately, that took time. Anointed with perfume made from precious oils and a crush of fragrant flowers, her face was painted white, its worry lines erased by a potion of cypress kernels, frankincense, wax, and milk. Her dark, curly hair was covered with a black, woolen wig whose braided tresses fell straight to her shoulders. She wore bracelets, rings, and a large necklace made out of gold.

Gazing at herself in a mirror of burnished bronze, Sarah wondered about the woman who looked back at her with so much sadness in her eyes. She had saved her husband's life, but what would happen to her? Would Abraham return home without her? How could she bear to part with him, living out her life as a captive in Pharaoh's harem?

Then something wonderful happened. A plague descended. Swift and terrible, it ravished Pharaoh's household, leaving only Sarah untouched. The stench of stomachs emptied in a hurry soon flooded the harem and every corner of Pharaoh's house. When he finally rose from his sickbed, Pharaoh summoned Abraham. "What have you done

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\* Geologists and archaeologists have discovered evidence of a three-hundred year drought cycle that took place at the end of the third millennium and the beginning of the second millennium BC, dovetailing with one of the periods in which Abraham and Sarah were thought to have lived. See John H. Walton, "Genesis," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:73–74.

to me?" he accused. "Why didn't you tell me Sarah was your wife? You pretended she was your sister. Now your God has cursed me. Take her and go!"

So Sarah and Abraham were rushed out of Egypt and loaded down with all the gifts that Pharaoh could bestow. One of these was Hagar, an Egyptian maiden who was destined to become Sarah's maid.

Hagar has heard the story many times. Indeed, she had lived through part of it. But whenever she recounts the tale, she leaves out the part about God standing up for Sarah, choosing instead to speculate on what it must have been like for her mistress to have become part of Pharaoh's harem.

Sarah knows about her handmaid's tendency to gossip, forever telling half-truths to cast her mistress in a bad light. Why, she wonders, did she ever tell Abraham to sleep with Hagar? At the time, it had seemed like a good idea to invoke the custom of letting another woman provide an heir when she could not. She had hoped it would ease the shame of her own barrenness.

Back then, Hagar had been a slip of a girl, ready to do whatever her mistress asked. Meek and eager to please, she went gladly enough to Abraham's bed. How could Sarah have known that the moment the young woman's belly began to swell with life, she would grow fat with self-importance, behaving as though she, and not Sarah, were the favored wife?

So Sarah began to despise her young maid, making her life a misery. She abused Hagar with words and work until she finally broke. Though pregnant with Abraham's child, the young woman had fled into the wilderness. When that happened, Sarah had felt a momentary twinge of guilt. But then Hagar had come stumbling back with foolish tales of an angel who had spoken to them and persuaded her to return.

Since then, Hagar has been nothing but trouble. How Sarah wishes the wilderness had swallowed her up.

Despite their constant strife, Sarah grows old in the knowledge that her place is secure in Abraham's heart. To know that is something. But it isn't quite everything. Then something happens that makes her realize she is first in God's heart too. Her belly begins to swell with a child. She ignores the wagging tongues and is amused at all the speculation.

How can a ninety-year-old woman survive the birth of a child? Even if she does, how will her shriveled up breasts produce enough milk? But Sarah is confident. She remembers the promise God made, first in a dream to Abraham, and then last year in broad daylight when he visited them both at their tent near the great trees of Mamre.

That was when the laughter began. Her husband had been sitting at the entrance of his tent in the middle of the day when suddenly he saw three strangers approaching. A generous man, Abraham begged them to linger and enjoy his hospitality. Ducking quickly inside the tent to ask Sarah to prepare some bread, he instructed a servant to slaughter the best calf from his herd.

The moment Sarah completed her task, she began to feel ill. Holding her hand to her stomach, she remembered the long forgotten pain she had experienced whenever her monthly flow began. But that had stopped years ago. Minutes passed until she was certain. She must stay in the tent until her days of uncleanness have passed. Whispering the news to Abraham, she explained why she would miss the meal that was about to begin.

She could see the shock on his face, the worry in his eyes. What woman's disease had she contracted? Would she be able to survive it?

Ever the gracious host, Abraham brought curds and milk and the roasted calf, setting the feast before his guests.

As they spoke, one of them asked, "Where is your wife, Sarah?"

Surely they were wondering why she wasn't at the meal.

"There, in the tent," Abraham replied, invoking a euphemism to explain that, like all menstruating women, she was secluded in her tent.\*

Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."<sup>7</sup> At once, Abraham realized that this was no ordinary stranger. God himself had spoken.

Eighty-nine-year-old Sarah had been listening to the conversation

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\* Though the biblical text (Genesis 18:1–15) never explicitly states that Sarah's period started again, some scholars point out that there is no evidence that men and women ate separately in the ancient world. That was a custom that developed later. So the guests may have noted the irregularity and inquired about it. When Abraham replied that his wife was "in the tent," he may have been employing a polite euphemism, indicating that she was menstruating and unable to join them. For this to have been the case, she would have needed to begin menstruating just after baking the bread because bread baking would have been forbidden to menstruating women. See John H. Walton, "Genesis," 1:91.

from the entrance to the tent. Hearing the stranger's outlandish promise, she broke into laughter, exclaiming to herself, "After I am worn out and my husband is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

"Why did Sarah laugh?" the Lord asked Abraham. "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."<sup>8</sup>

Afraid, Sarah replied, "I did not laugh."

Speaking directly to Sarah this time, God said, "Ah, but you did laugh."

And laugh she did and laugh she would until the day her son Isaac—whose name means "laughter"—is finally born. She and Abraham laugh together. The joy rises up strong and wild and even were she to try, she cannot push it down. "God has brought me laughter," she says, "and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

And so it is that in her old age Sarah comes to understand that God has a sense of humor. Despite every shred of trouble and every evil circumstance, she knows that in the end he will in the end prevail, laughing all his enemies to scorn.

But Sarah still has enemies. And they are close at hand.

By now Isaac is three, and he has just been weaned. Since death sweeps so many babies away, his good health is reason to celebrate. Despite the feast that Abraham throws to mark the vigor of his youngest son, Sarah is worried. So she presses him: "Get rid of that slave woman and her son," she tells her husband, "for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."<sup>9</sup>

But Abraham's heart is breaking because he loves both sons. How can he deny one to favor the other?

To Sarah's great relief, the Lord appears to Abraham and weighs in on her side, instructing her husband to "do whatever Sarah says." So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael packing, straight into the wilderness.

But instead of meeting with ruin, as one might expect them to, they encounter a messenger from God. Because of an angel and a well of water and the Lord's protecting hand, Ishmael grows up and, as the Scripture says, turns into "a wild donkey of a man."

Sarah only knows that she is thankful to be rid of him and Hagar. Finally she can die a happy woman. Of course, she doesn't know that her husband will one day take their son on a three-day journey into the wilderness and then up a mountain to be sacrificed. Abraham will make an altar, place Isaac on it, and then raise his knife to slaughter him.

When Sarah passes at the age of 127, she can imagine neither the glories nor the troubles that lay ahead for the descendants of the two sons of Abraham—the Arabs, who are Ishmael's descendants, and the Jews, who come from Isaac's line.

Had she been able to peer even further into the future, to the time when another beloved son would ascend the very same mountain on which Abraham was told by God to slay his son—she would have come to know the deepest truth of all. No matter how wickedness multiplies or troubles mount up, God will indeed have the last word, laughing his enemies to scorn.

## THE TIMES

She lived around 2156–2029 BC.

*Sarah's story is told in Genesis 12:1–20; 16:1–8; 17:1–22; 18:1–15; 21:1–13. She is also mentioned in Galatians 4:22–31.*

During the lifetime of Abraham and Sarah, the surrounding peoples worshiped an array of gods. Gradually the concept of a more personal god emerged, with people expressing special devotion to a particular god who would become their special protector and provider. This may have been how Abraham and Sarah first viewed God when they heard him promise to give them many descendants.

Devotion to the family deity would have passed from generation to generation, but other gods would also have been worshiped. Only in Israel would the God of Abraham and Sarah come to be known as the God of the whole nation.

Because the ancient world had so little understanding of what caused diseases and disorders, superstitions abounded, causing additional shame to those who suffered from sickness or physical ailments.

Sarah's grief at being unable to bear children would have been made sharply worse because her barrenness would have been seen as a sign of

divine judgment. Surely she had done something to make God angry, and he was exacting punishment by withholding children.

Though ancient peoples would have perceived a connection between menstruation and the timing of a pregnancy, they would not have grasped the biological reality that a human being is created only when a female egg is fertilized by male sperm. They believed that life was created when a man planted his seed into a woman's womb. The woman was seen as a receptacle or incubator in which the seed could grow. If a couple failed to conceive after the man had done his duty, or if the child miscarried, the wife was invariably blamed.

Sarah's barrenness must have put tremendous pressure on her marriage. She couldn't have known that her inability to bear children earlier in life had nothing to do with her sin but everything to do with God's plan to bring about a new people—children of the promise—of whom Abraham would be father and Sarah would be mother. Her pregnancy must have brought a profound sense of vindication and relief.

Four thousand years after her death, Sarah's story lives on. Scripture states that she was buried in the Cave of Machpelah in what is known today as the Tomb of the Patriarchs, along with other key figures whose stories are told in the book of Genesis—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah. Located in the West Bank city of Hebron, the site traditionally ascribed to the tomb can still be visited today. It is not far from where Sarah would have sat in her tent, laughing out loud when she first heard God's outrageous promise to give her and Abraham a son.

## THE TAKEAWAY

1. Like many biblical characters, and many real people, Sarah is not an entirely virtuous person. Comment on the good and bad aspects of her character as revealed in the story. Which do you relate to most?
2. Sarah was sixty-five when God promised he would make Abraham (and by inference Sarah) into a great nation. But Isaac wasn't born until twenty-five years later. Why do you think God spoke the promise so far in advance?
3. By suggesting that Abraham sleep with her maid in order to produce an heir, Sarah was merely following the customs of the time. She was also trying to make God's promise come true. Have you ever tried to force God's hand? What were the results?
4. Do you believe God has promised you something? How would you characterize your experience as you waited, and perhaps still wait, for the promise to be fulfilled?