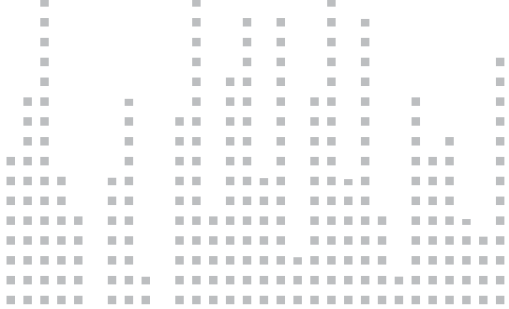




PRAISE FOR SOUNDBITE THEOLOGY

This book will certainly teach readers to watch their theological language. But Rev. Dr. Meyer delivers more than a sound bite. This book is nothing less than a primer in foundational doctrinal distinctions. Anyone interested in better understanding Lutheran teaching would do well to begin here.

—Joel Biermann, Waldemar A. and June Schuette Professor of
Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

We live amid a cacophony of data: digital, print, sound, video. It's hard to make sense of all the conflicting messages we receive on most any topic. They come at us urgently, compellingly, urging us to vote in a certain way, buy a certain product, or believe a certain way. Whether through TikTok, YouTube, or the constant stream we are fed online by would-be media influencers, we are left drowning in sound bites. Joel Meyer has something different for us. He answers this cacophony with the still, small voice of the Word of God. Sound words will clear up the sound bites. Read his book, and you will begin to see beyond the constant clutter of error to the surety of God's promises in Christ Jesus.

—Harold L. Senkbeil, director emeritus, DOXOLOGY: The
Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel; author of *Dying
to Live: The Foundation, Focus, and Shape of the Christian Life*
(CPH, 2024)

Joel Meyer's *Soundbite Theology* brings a fresh look at often-spoken clichés that well-meaning Christians say in attempts to offer comfort or support to others. Meyer offers a clear-eyed discussion of several of these, exposing their weaknesses, especially in that they often offer the Law to people who desperately need to hear Gospel encouragement. Meyer helps readers understand how to avoid the pitfalls of convenient but ineffective sound bites and to instead offer real comfort from God's Word.

—Andrew Steinmann, *distinguished professor emeritus of theology and Hebrew; chair, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Doctrinal Review*

Sound bites may be easy to dismiss or deplore, but they matter anyhow. They especially matter when they have to do with God. We will use them, so we should understand them clearly and use them faithfully. Joel Meyer's *Soundbite Theology* is an excellent guide for these tasks. He has the skill to explain how sound bites work, the insight to assess them faithfully, and the wisdom to show us how to acquire and use theological sound bites that are truly sound words.

—Joel P. Okamoto, *ThD, Waldemar and Mary Griesbach Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

A common sound bite is "Words matter." In *Soundbite Theology*, Rev. Dr. Joel Meyer recognizes the truth of this phrase when it comes to the many theological sound bites that Christians encounter each day. In a fast-paced, soundbite world, Meyer takes care to thoughtfully unpack good, bad, and ugly sound bites with a theological mind and a pastoral heart. This book will benefit both readers' listening and their speaking—training ears to hear sound bites through the filter of Scripture's truths and training mouths to talk about things of faith with greater confidence. Written in a way that is simple, yet not simplistic, this book is a wonderful resource for congregations and individuals. Meyer's text would have great value

for reflection among elders, discussion in a book club format, reading in personal devotion, or even as a resource for a series of sermons. In a sound bite: This book is worth your time.

—Rev. Dr. Matthew Clark, senior pastor, Ascension Lutheran Church, St. Louis; guest instructor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

When people we love are walking through hard seasons, such as grief, anxiety, or trauma, we want to encourage and comfort them. Often, we say phrases we believe are helping, but Joel does an incredible job of showing us that these phrases are not comforting and can even be harmful. Joel points us to our true comfort: Jesus. He gives us words, grounded in Jesus, that we can use to truly support our loved ones.

—Faith Doerr, Christian author and speaker

In *Soundbite Theology*, Pastor Joel Meyer combines the sharp mind of an academic with the deeply compassionate heart of a true shepherd. He gets that the casual phrases we repeat in times of trouble deeply shape our faith. With genuine pastoral warmth, Meyer doesn't just critique our everyday language; instead, he gently guides us to replace hollow clichés with rich, Gospel-centered truth. This book is an invaluable, accessible tool that will equip you to anchor your everyday conversations in the truth of God's Word. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants their words to bring true comfort.

—Rev. Brian Davies, pastor, Lord of Glory Lutheran Church, Grayslake, Illinois; author of *Captivating Conversations: How Christians Can Reclaim the Lost Art of Listening* (CPH, 2024) and *Connected to Christ: Overcoming Isolation Through Community* (CPH, 2021)

Soundbite *Theology*

HOW TO TALK LIKE A CHRISTIAN

JOEL P. MEYER



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*To the Body of Christ
at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
in Kingsland, Georgia.
My teachers in the parish.*





CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. HOW MUCH FAITH IS ENOUGH?	
God, Faith, and Righteousness	13
2. HOW TO HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS	
Scripture and Preaching	39
3. DO I HAVE TO . . . ?	
The Distinction Between Law and Gospel	61
4. DOES GOD “HAVE A PURPOSE”?	
God Hidden and God Preached	81
5. ARE WE MADE TO BE GREAT?	
A Theologian of the Cross Versus a Theologian of Glory	103
6. CAN I CHOOSE LIFE?	
A Theologian of the Cross on Sin, Free Choice, and the Law	125
7. IS SUFFERING BAD?	
A Theologian of the Cross on Suffering and Prayer	143
8. DO I HAVE TO FIND MY MINISTRY?	
The Crucified Life	167



INTRODUCTION

*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
(2 Timothy 1:13)*

You don't have to have a degree in theology to be a theologian. A theologian is someone who thinks and talks about God, and just about everyone does that. Most people, though, do theology in a different register or frequency. Academic theologians work in an analytical register. They read the ideas of others, analyze them, come up with a thesis, and make extended arguments. Everyday theology usually happens in sound bites. When life becomes difficult beyond our control, someone might say, "God won't give you more than you can handle," or "God's timing is always right." That isn't just something we say—the sound bites work on us. We draw encouragement from hearing them; they comfort us, correct us, and galvanize us.

When I finished an advanced degree in theology, I took a call and became a parish pastor. But I was stuck in an academic mode of thinking. When I visited someone in the hospital who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the person's family started using sound bites to cope with the news. "All things are possible with God." "You just have to have enough faith." "The power of prayer!"

As an academically trained theologian, my analytical mind started raising all sorts of red flags. *This is a theology of glory*, I thought. Or, *Faith isn't a work; it's something that's worked in us by the Gospel, so we shouldn't rely on our faith*. So I tried there in the hospital room to help them analyze what they were saying. Needless to say, there is a time and a place for analysis and reflection, but in a hospital room, facing a terminal diagnosis, is not it. By that time, it's too late. You need to grab hold of whatever sound bite is available and use it for all it's worth. Those were the sound bites they had at hand—what they had been trained to reach for in these situations.

I realized then and there what I had to do for my congregation. I needed to change the sound bites. I had to identify all the sound bites in use and then help my congregation evaluate the good ones (which we should always have at hand), the not-so-good ones (which we should be careful to use only at the proper time and place), and the terrible ones (which we should forget and erase from our memory, except to use as an example of what not to say). That way, when the time in life comes to grab hold of a sound bite and use it, we would have sound words. That is, we would have words that would help us put our fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Such attention to sound (that is, good and healthy) words has a long history in the theological tradition. Take one example from the Lutheran Confessions, specifically

Introduction

the Formula of Concord.¹ In a debate over the freedom of the will, Victor Strigel, professor of theology at the University of Jena, insisted that original sin was an accident of human nature (that is, an unessential feature of being human, like the color of a chair rather than the chair itself). Matthias Flacius, his colleague at the university, argued that such language failed to capture the depth of our bondage to sin. Flacius responded by insisting that original sin was the substance of human nature (essential to what it is to be human).

The Formula of Concord analyzed these two statements and then suggested helpful ways of speaking about original sin. It concluded that we would do best to avoid using the terms *substance* and *accident* apart from specialized academic debate because neither quite captures what we want to say about original sin. But if we do have to use one of these terms, it would be *accident* because *substance* makes it sound like God created us evil, and that's not what the Scriptures teach. And we should use the term *accident* when talking about original sin only when we want to specify the difference between God's handiwork and the devil's handiwork. If the question is, Did God create us sinful? then, and only then, should we say that original sin is an "accident."

In providing these guidelines for speaking about original sin, the Formula of Concord sees itself as following through on Paul's instructions to Timothy: "Follow the

1 *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Fortress Press, 2000), 487–91, 531–42. Used by permission.

pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” However, the Formula of Concord is still operating in an analytical register, identifying the pattern of sound words for academic instruction and debate. This book will identify the pattern of sound words for our everyday life of faith.

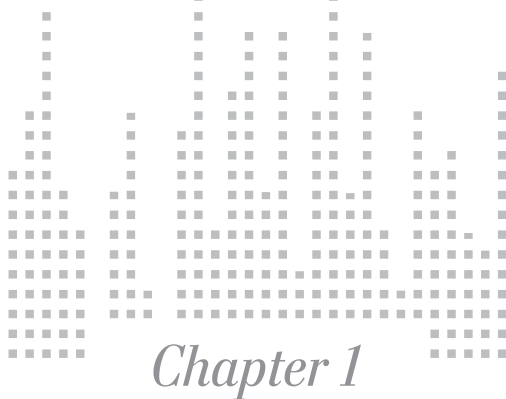
Each chapter begins with a popular sound bite. But to determine whether that sound bite is good or bad, we need to know something about who God is and how He operates. We’ll have to explore Christian theology, so the opening sound bite will introduce a theological topic that we’ll cover in depth. But don’t let that scare you away. I try my best *not* to use any technical jargon or make any assumptions about what you already know. Most of the theology in this book is reflection on passages from the Scriptures, discussing what they say and how we use them. But the theology is not simplistic either—I encourage you to think seriously, and sometimes deeply, about God and what we say about Him. In the process, each chapter will provide sound words—good sound bites—that we can use in daily life.

The chapters, in that way, are accessible for someone who has only a little background in the Christian faith as well as someone more experienced in Christian theology. Hopefully, this feature makes the book widely useful in the parish. I have used this material for new membership and confirmation classes, elder studies, evangelism training, and even as a study at pastors’ circuit meetings.

My prayer is that reading and discussing this book will give you a competent grasp of theology that equips you to

Introduction

analyze, discuss, and use sound words in everyday life—words that help anchor your faith in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.



HOW MUCH FAITH IS ENOUGH?

God, Faith, and Righteousness

“YOU JUST HAVE TO HAVE ENOUGH FAITH.” At first glance, this may sound like good and pious advice. Someone you know may be struggling to make ends meet. He has a bill to pay, but he can’t figure out where he’ll get the money to pay it. And because he can’t see how it will work out, he worries. He can’t stop turning it over in his mind, and he is starting to lose sleep.

Or someone you know may have a medical test coming up, and she is afraid of the results. Her lymph nodes have been swollen, and the doctors haven’t been able to rule out cancer. She has spent countless hours on her phone trying to figure out what kind of cancer she may have, what the treatment may be, and what the typical life expectancy is for a disease like this. Rather than trust that God is our Father who will give us what’s good, both of these people become fixated on their problems and the fact that they don’t have an obvious solution.

And so you may feel compelled to say, “You just have to have enough faith.” When people offer this advice, they typically mean, “You have to be more confident in God,” or “You have to turn your worry over to God and let Him take care of it,” or, as it’s often said, “Let go and let God.” See? Good and pious. I mean, isn’t this what we’re supposed to do? Trust God and worry less?

But notice who that statement focuses on. *You!* *You* have to trust God more. *You* have to be more confident in God. *You* have to turn your worry over to God and “let” Him take care of it. As a result, what does this statement do? It places the burden on the person who is suffering. It’s bad enough that he’s having trouble paying the bills or that she may have cancer, but now this person has to worry about whether he or she is doing enough of the right thing?

And, truth be told, that is usually how this statement ends up getting used: as a guilt trip that this person isn’t doing enough. It easily slips into “If you just had enough faith, you wouldn’t be so worried,” which then slips into “You clearly don’t have enough faith—that’s why you’re so worried all the time.” And from there, it’s not too far a step to “Why do you think God should help you when you clearly don’t trust Him?” Not only is this person suffering, but now he or she has to question whether he or she is in a right relationship with God too.

And on top of it all, faith is almost impossible to measure. How do we ever know that we trust God enough, that we’re confident enough, or that we’ve turned it over to God enough? Is it when we’re completely worry-free

How Much Faith Is Enough?

and at peace? Well, if that's the case, then just a little bit of uncertainty—just a little bit of worry—can lead us to lose confidence in our own faith. We seem like a failure, like we're not good enough. How can we ever be sure that we've done enough?

People don't usually say, "You just have to have enough faith" because they want to put a guilt trip on someone who is suffering. People say it because they want to encourage others in their suffering, and there is some truth to it. They can and should trust God in these circumstances. But if you want to encourage someone in their suffering, it would be much better to talk not about what they should be doing but about Jesus and what He can do. The Scriptures emphasize faith not to pressure us to try harder but to point us to God and His trustworthiness. Your faith is only as strong as the one in whom you put your trust, and God is the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist. And in Jesus Christ, God has promised us His unending faithfulness.

God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth

While the sound bite "You just have to have enough faith" isn't very helpful, it does get something right. We can and should trust in God. God, after all, is the Creator, which means that everything that exists constantly depends on God for its existence. God constantly provides everything that we are and have purely as a gift, as the Small Catechism

states in the first article of the Apostles' Creed, out of "His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." And for that, God is to be trusted above all things. We can and should depend on Him, look to Him for all good, and rely on Him in times of need.

The Apostles' Creed identifies God as the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And when we unpack this phrase, we can see more clearly why trust is so central to our relationship with God.

Let's start with the last phrase: God is the maker of heaven and earth. In the beginning, God created everything: light and darkness, the sea and dry land, the solar system and countless stars, plants and trees each according to their kind, fish and birds each according to their kind, land animals each according to their kind, and human beings. And He told them all to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But God didn't simply set it all in motion and then step back to watch it run on its own. To call God the "maker of heaven and earth" means that everything in existence owes its continued existence to God alone.

God created everything out of nothing, after all. God didn't create as we create. If we want to make a chair, for example, we have to use the materials at our disposal. Those materials exist on their own apart from our planning and construction, and so we're limited by the constraints of what's already there. But God didn't refashion a substance that was always there; God brought into being what didn't exist before. God simply spoke, and it happened (see Genesis 1:1–2:3).

How Much Faith Is Enough?

As the psalmist declares, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host. . . . Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him! For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:6, 8–9). All the earth should fear the Lord, according to the psalm, because God doesn’t owe it anything. Nothing exists on its own accord. The only reason the sun rises, trees grow, rain falls, or our hearts beat—the only reason there is a solar system, galaxies, and a universe—is that God spoke it into being. Apart from God’s constant providence, nothing would exist. God is the one in whom all things live and move and have their being (see Acts 17:28).

And that means God is *almighty*. Think about the most powerful thing within the universe, like the force of gravity. The force of gravity sends the earth flying around the sun at thousands of miles per hour and is foundational to our everyday existence. The very ground we walk on depends on gravity’s pull. God isn’t just more powerful than gravity; God is the reason gravity exists in the first place. (God, in that sense, isn’t just really powerful—God is power itself.) The reason gravity exerts a force on us is because God commands it.

And that means that God isn’t constrained by gravity or time or anything else. Nothing can slow God down. Time doesn’t wear on God, and the powers of nature can’t weaken God. God is the Creator, the everlasting God. He stands above and beyond all the powers of this world. In fact, the powers of this world depend on God like a newborn

depends on its mother. God is not pushed around by the forces of this world. God determines the forces of this world. As the psalm says, “Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end” (Psalm 102:25–27). God rules over everything, and everything depends on Him.

But God isn’t just almighty. God is also the *Father*. If everything that exists constantly depends on God for its existence, that means everything we have is continuously given to us by God. The reason that the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening, the rain falls and plants grow, or that we have beating hearts and thinking minds is this: God commands it to be. As the psalmist declares, “The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand; You satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psalm 145:15–16). And as the Small Catechism confesses:

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.

He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily

How Much Faith Is Enough?

provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.

He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil.

All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.

This is most certainly true.²

This last phrase from the catechism may be the most important. “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.” Why does God give us our body and soul, clothing and shoes, spouse and children? Not because He owes us! Think about our bodies and souls. It would be strange to say that God gave me my body and soul because I earned or deserved them. I didn’t do anything good or bad before God created me. God created me without any obligation, freely out of His will and desire.

And the same is true for everything that exists. The only reason that “the going out of the morning and the evening [shout] for joy” (Psalm 65:8)—that there are strawberries in the spring and blueberries in the summer, that we, according to God’s good grace, might have parents who love us, a spouse who clings to us, and children who delight us—is because of God’s fatherly, divine goodness and

2 Small Catechism, Creed, First Article.

mercy. God didn't have to create me. God created me and constantly provides for all I need simply because He loves me. And for that, God can and should be trusted above all things. We can and should depend on Him, look to Him for all good, and rely on Him in times of need. Since God is the Creator, our basic relationship with Him is one of trust.

“It’s a God Thing”

Before we talk more about the importance of trust, we are at a point where we can evaluate a few common sound bites about God. One common sound bite is this: “It’s a God thing.” People typically use this phrase when they receive an inexplicable blessing. Someone may be fifty dollars short on their electric bill, and they find a fifty-dollar bill in the parking lot at the grocery store. They may say, “It’s a God thing” to express the sheer miracle that just when they needed money, God provided it out of thin air. On the one hand, this phrase is certainly true.

God provides all we need, including a fifty-dollar bill lying in the parking lot. But isn't the fact that the sun rises in the morning, food is on our table, and we have a roof over our head also a “God thing”? We often take these things for granted, as if they should be there. But each of those things exists only because of God's doing. They are just as much a miracle out of thin air, so to speak, as finding a fifty-dollar bill in the parking lot just when we need it. And if we think that only miracles are a God thing, then it will seem as if God isn't there for us unless a miracle happens.

So instead of saying, “It’s a God thing,” it would be more helpful to remember this phrase: “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me” (or simply “fatherly goodness and mercy”). Use it not only when you catch a break but in all things.

“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

This phrase sounds good and pious because it encourages hard work. It usually means that if you work hard, then you’ll be rewarded with success. And there is a measure of truth to this statement. With the exception of an occasional fifty-dollar bill in the parking lot, God doesn’t just drop food into our laps. God gives us seed and soil, a body and mind, and expects us to use them. But when people use this phrase, they typically mean that if we take the initiative, then God owes us, as if we deserve it, and God is in our debt to make it work out. Or worse yet, they mean that instead of relying on God, the way to success is to rely on your own hard work and effort.

Many people know this from experience: Hard work doesn’t necessarily mean success. So many factors that are out of our control need to come together so that our hard work can turn into success, like a healthy body that can work a day’s labor. The only reason we have a healthy body—anything else that helps our work bear fruit—is because God provides it. In that sense, God doesn’t owe us. Everything we have is an undeserved gift given to us

by God without any merit or worthiness in us. If we want to emphasize the need to work hard, we would be better off saying, “God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand,”³ as Luther says.

The Righteousness of Faith

Let’s return to the topic of trust. Because God, who is almighty, created me and constantly provides for me purely out of His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy and without any merit or worthiness in me, I can and should trust in God above all things. I can and should depend on Him, look to Him for all good, and rely on Him in times of need. Since God is the Creator, my basic relationship with God is based on trust and broken by unbelief.

We experience something similar in relationships of love and commitment all the time. Imagine this everyday scenario: Let’s say I had to work late one day, and when I told my wife, she said, “Well, don’t worry about the dishes tonight. I’ll wash them for you.” Because she loves me and knows that I’ll be exhausted when I get home late, she promised to take care of one of my chores.

But then, instead of trusting her promise and relying on her love, I continued to worry about the dishes. During my evening meeting, I texted one of my kids to see if their mom had done the dishes. Then I cut the meeting short

3 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 14, trans. Edward Sittler, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 115.

How Much Faith Is Enough?

so I could run home and do them myself. Maybe I did this because I didn't think she would follow through, or that she wouldn't do it the way I think it should be done. Maybe I did it because I felt guilty that she would have to do my chore, and I didn't want to ruin my reputation of being hardworking. In either case, how would our relationship go when I showed up early and started washing the dishes?

She would be rightly put off. She made me a promise because she loved me. But rather than trust and depend on her love and her words, I threw it all back in her face. I told her by my actions that I didn't trust her or want her help. She is my wife. She has pledged to love and cherish me till death do us part. But rather than receive her love, I rejected it. As a result, our relationship would be broken—or at least strained.

On the other hand, though, if I banked on her promise, finished the meeting, came home, and, since the dishes were done, sat down next to her on the couch and enjoyed some dessert together (which she prepared for me too), our relationship would be right. She loved me, just as she pledged to do. And I received her love by trusting in her promise.

The same dynamics are at work in our relationship with God, the Creator—who can do a lot more than wash the dishes and make dessert—and whose love and faithfulness have no boundaries.

There is no clearer example of the righteousness of faith than Abraham. One day, out of the blue, the Lord said to Abraham (or Abram, as he was called then), “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to

the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1–2). The only problem was that Abraham was already seventy-five years old, and his wife, Sarah (or Sarai), was barren. The promise that God would make Abraham’s name great and give him as many descendants as the stars in the sky, as the Lord would put it later, didn’t seem likely at all. And yet, what did Abraham do? He banked on the fact that the Lord is almighty, that the Lord isn’t pushed around by the forces of this world but determines the forces of this world. Paul, in Romans, describes Abraham this way:

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No