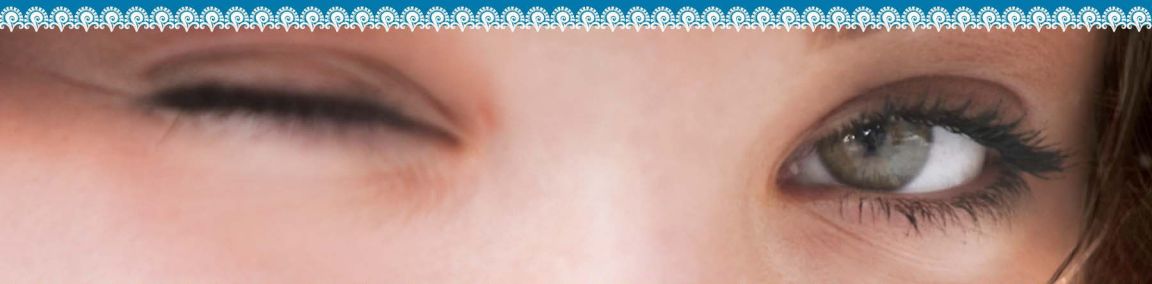


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The contemporary story in each chapter is fiction. The characters and events are fictional and are not intended to parallel exactly the biblical story.

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To Laura Barker,

*M*y talented editor at WaterBrook Press
and one of the genuine Good Girls.
Your patience, kindness, and support
kept me going on many a late night
in my writing study.

*B*less you for nudging without prodding,
suggesting without insisting,
and caring as much about
the finished pages as I do.
(With special emphasis on
the word *finished*.)

*W*e did it, sis!
Thanks to you.

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A Matter of Time

*I'm extraordinarily patient,
provided I get my own way in the end.*

MARGARET THATCHER

T*wo minutes?* Sandi glanced at her watch, then stifled a groan. *More like ten, Alan.*

She paced outside her husband's private office, barely noticing the elegant Oriental rug beneath her feet: a gift from one of his business associates in Istanbul, woven in midnight blue and dusky rose, the colors surprisingly vibrant. Alan's interior designer dated the classic Kerman rug as late nineteenth century.

And here's another antique. Pausing at the foyer mirror, Sandi lifted a sweep of ash blond hair from her forehead, relieved not to notice any telltale silver strands, yet dismayed by the fine lines near her eyes. Alan had already crossed the half-century mark. But on a sunlit Maryland morning, he fearlessly greeted the day, sans wrinkles, while she, five years younger, hid beneath a wide-brimmed hat. Sandi took a step back, assessing her figure as well.

"Admiring the view?" Alan teased, standing in his office doorway. "I believe that's my job." He crossed the vacant foyer to stand behind her at the mirror, slipped his arms around her waist, and drew her near. When he pressed a warm kiss against the back of her neck, she felt a frisson of pleasure and watched herself blush.

Twenty-five years of marriage, and he still treated her like a princess.

She sighed, no longer irritated that he'd kept her waiting. From Alan's viewpoint, she had nothing but time. Time to shop for his designer clothes. Time to organize elaborate dinner parties. Time to travel the world at a moment's notice.

To be fair, she *did* have time; what she didn't have was children.

"You look wonderful in royal blue," Alan said, his gaze meeting hers in the mirrored glass. "Was that one of the colors our photographer suggested?"

"No, Pavla chose it."

"Ah."

Sandi heard his even tone, sensed his unspoken words. Alan thought she was too dependent on Pavla, the young housekeeper who made their lives run smoothly.

He turned Sandi around to face him, then gently kissed her. "What you need is an hour with a photographer who fawns over your beautiful self." When she protested, his features darkened into an exaggerated scowl. "None of this 'considering my age' business. The moment we step into his studio, Yafeu will insist on adding you to his roster of models."

"*Senior* models perhaps," Sandi murmured, though she held his compliments close to her heart. Few husbands were as supportive as Alan Cannon.

That evening the mingled scents of garlic and onion greeted them at the door. "Dinner at seven," Sandi reminded her husband as he headed toward his office in the back of the house. She aimed toward the kitchen, where Cossack Chicken was on the menu.

She found Pavla chopping fresh mushrooms, hands and knife moving across the cutting board with effortless precision. In a neat line along the countertop stood the other ingredients to be added: grated swiss, crumbled feta, sour cream, and nutmeg. Pavla looked up, touching the back of her hand to the mass of hair gathered into a knot on her crown. "Your photos went well, yes?"

Sandi merely shrugged. Yafeu had indeed showered her with praise. Hair, features, wardrobe, posture—his dark Egyptian eyes missed nothing. But since the appointment book noted "Family Portrait," Yafeu had asked not once but three times, "Are there no children? No grandchildren?"

"No," Alan had repeatedly answered for both of them, the resignation in his voice unmistakable. One son: that was all he prayed for, all he longed for. For her part, Sandi had felt ready to scream by session's end. Yafeu could not know the pain his innocent words inflicted. The photographer had sent

them out the door with a gratis collection of sterling silver picture frames, yet his words lingered, taunting her. *No children?*

"You are tired," Pavla said simply as she added the chopped mushrooms to a saucepan. "Maybe lie down before dinner?"

"I *am* exhausted," Sandi agreed. Of late she wasn't sleeping well and had trouble staying focused. Most days her nerves were on edge, and she often snapped at Alan for no reason. At last week's visit to her ob-gyn, Sandi had recited a litany of her symptoms as Dr. Goodman nodded, then delivered a single-word diagnosis: "Perimenopausal."

No need to spell it out. At forty-six she understood too well.

Out of habit Sandi reviewed Pavla's dinner preparations once more, then retreated to the cool darkness of the master bedroom. Her housekeeper was right: a short nap would improve her perspective. After slipping off her blue dress, she snuggled under the goose-down duvet and closed her eyes, waiting for the hypnotic pull of sleep. "Bless you, Pavla," she whispered, sinking deeper into the pillow.

When Pavla Teslenko had first arrived from Ukraine seeking a new life, Alan and Sandi had ushered the girl into their home, certain they would require an au pair. As the years passed and no children came, Pavla made herself useful cleaning the house, doing laundry, running errands. Gradually she'd taken over Sandi's kitchen, specializing in Alan's favorite potato pancakes—*deruny*, she called them—and a liver pâté their dinner guests adored.

Under their guidance, the frightened, awkward teenager had grown into a self-assured and competent young woman, whose raven hair framed a round, pleasing face. Fluent in English, Pavla had become a naturalized citizen last spring, yet remained loyal to the Cannons.

More than one friend had cautioned Sandi about harboring a younger woman under the same roof as a wealthy husband. "Pavla's half your age," Lynn from their couples' class had reminded her last Sunday. "I know she's your right hand—"

"And my left as well," Sandi had told her friend, bringing the discussion to an abrupt end. She wasn't about to send away a valuable housekeeper to appease Lynn or anyone else.

Too agitated to sleep now, Sandi rolled over with a groan and squinted at the alarm clock. Did she need bifocals too?

A firm knock at the door, then Alan entered their bedroom. "Pavla said I might find you resting." He eased onto their bed and reached down to brush the hair from her eyes. "I'm sorry you've had a hard day."

She looked away, his tender expression more than she could bear. "It's worse than that."

A long silence. "Tell me again what Dr. Goodman said last week."

"He told me that...a healthy pregnancy is...unlikely." Her throat tightened. "We've done everything right, Alan. Why can't I..."

Alan bent over her and kissed each cheek. "God alone knows," he said softly, meaning to comfort her.

Sandi would never confess such a thing to her saintly husband, but she wasn't convinced God cared enough to intervene. He'd created the world and all it contained. Could he not bless her womb with one healthy son? Was it too much to ask? She and Alan had endured years of fertility tests and medical procedures, each failure crushing their hopes yet again.

Dr. Goodman had ruled out in vitro fertilization. And adoption was out of the question since Alan insisted their child be biologically his. "Not because adoption isn't a wonderful thing," he assured her each time she raised the possibility. "But God has assured me that if I'll trust him, he'll give us a son of our own someday. I know that's what you want too."

Sandi just wanted a child in her arms. *Soon. Tomorrow. Now.*

When Alan stood, he pulled her up with him. "Come to dinner, sweetheart. There's no heartache Pavla can't mend with her cooking."

Dear, thoughtful Alan. The man was determined to make her happy.

Minutes later, freshly dressed and perfumed, Sandi joined her husband in their oversize dining room, designed with entertaining in mind. They sat at one end of the long table, a spray of red gladioli creating a more intimate space. Pavla served the meal as usual, placing each course before them with quiet assurance.

Sandi watched her closely, noticing as if for the first time how mature

Pavla had become. A healthy, twenty-something woman. Full of energy, brimming with life. The perfect age for conceiving a child, for giving birth...

Sandi's eyes widened. *There's no heartache Pavla can't mend.*

Alan's words, but with a very different meaning.

Pavla. Bearing my husband's child. For me.

Sandi blanched at the outrageous notion. Had anyone she'd ever known done such a thing? Yet if the law allowed surrogate motherhood and if both parties were willing, might it not be the very best solution?

Distracted by her thoughts, she let Alan carry their dinner conversation until Pavla arrived with dessert...



Sarai: Princess Bride

A lovely name, Sarah. All soft consonants and airy vowels. Not so much spoken as released, like a sigh. Among popular biblical names, *Sarah* reigns and rightly so: her name means “princess.”¹

You'll find her mentioned by name in Scripture more than any other woman—an impressive fifty-three times in the NIV translation, beginning here:

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai... *Genesis 11:29*

No, not a typo; for most of her life she was known as “Sarai.” Scholars say, even with the *i*, the meaning of her name is “princess,” but one source offers an intriguing alternative definition for *Sarai*: “argumentative.”² Keep that feisty notion in mind as our story unfolds. *Sarai* was also a popular name among devotees of Ningal, consort of the moon god, worshiped in her native Assyria.³ No wonder the Lord was eager to change the spelling of *Sarai* to *Sarah*!

Ah, but we're getting ahead of ourselves. We can assume that, with such a royal name, Sarai was born at the top of the social ladder and “lived a privileged life in one of the ancient world's great cities.”⁴ That is to say, Ur.

Reminds me of that sound people make when they're stalling for time.

"Where's home?"

"Uh...er..."

However plain the name, Ur in its day was a commercial and cultural hub, a gathering place for philosophers and astronomers.⁵ Thanks to the nightly news, we can point to the region on a world map, between the head of the Persian Gulf and Baghdad.

That's right: southeastern Iraq.

Twelve thousand people crowded the streets of Ur when the place was really hopping, around 2100 BC.⁶ Archaeologists have unearthed a treasure trove of objects where Ur once stood: gold, silver, precious stones, musical instruments, weapons, even game boards.⁷ (I haven't a Clue whether they played Monopoly, Scrabble, Candy Land...oh, Sorry!)

When my husband read this part of the manuscript, he piped up, "The Royal Game of Ur." *The what?* Turns out, it's a wooden board game still on the market, a replica of the ancient gaming board found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920s.⁸

Just think: Abram and Sarai might have been gamers!

But they weren't playing games when it came to marriage. Their 'til-death-do-us-part relationship lasted a *century* or more, depending on Sarai's age the day they wed. Though the ancients said she was a beauty—"All the maidens and all the brides that go beneath the wedding canopy are not more fair than she"⁹—a dark cloud shadowed Sarai's tent.

Now Sarai was barren; she had no children. *Genesis 11:30*

Oh dear. Whether phrased as a singular "child" (NASB) or plural "children," the sad truth is made doubly clear in one stark verse. By describing Sarai as barren *and* without children, Scripture "emphasizes the seriousness of her plight by the repetition."¹⁰

Listen, we got it the first time. We're already grieving for this beautiful but infertile woman, imagining the hope that blossomed in her heart each month, only to be crushed by despair when she found a spot of blood on her tunic. *Not this month. Not any month.*

Four thousand years ago barrenness was “the ultimate disgrace, understood as a sign of divine disfavor.”¹¹ A woman who couldn’t conceive would have been considered a Bad Girl indeed. Furthermore, a barren woman “suffered not only lack of esteem, but also threat of divorce.”¹² Talk about adding insult to injury: she was ridiculed by others, believed to be shunned by God, *and* considered disposable by her husband.

Thank goodness we no longer use the word *barren* to describe a woman unable to bear children. *Sterile* or *infertile* sounds more clinical and less judgmental, though for a woman who longs to give birth, the unfortunate outcome is the same: an empty womb.

Some of us understand Sarai’s heartache at a deeply personal level. Is that you, dear sister? Then a word of comfort before we go any further: you are safe here. I’ll not prod at your pain. And you can be very sure it wasn’t Sarai’s inability to conceive that made her a Slightly Bad Girl. Not for one minute. In fact, her childless state made room for a miracle. God was not displeased with her; he intended to be glorified in her. Think of that! Barrenness became “the arena of God’s life-giving action.”¹³

Though Ur is where Sarai’s story began, that’s not where it ended. This family was on the move.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. *Genesis 11:31*

The centuries have reduced prosperous Ur to ruins, with one prominent object left standing: a “pyramid-like brick tower, or ziggurat, built in tribute to Sin, the moon god.”¹⁴ Naturally, Abram and Sarai had to turn their backs on Sin to follow God (sorry, couldn’t resist), and so this determined couple directed their camels northward, skirting the vast Arabian Desert.

Sarai exchanged “certainty for uncertainty, possession for chance, acquaintances for strangers...the amenities of the city for the hardships of the desert.”¹⁵ She displayed strength, bravery, and a willingness to take risks. I like her already.

But when they came to Haran, they settled there. *Genesis 11:31*

Not for long. Though some family members remained in Haran, Abram and Sarai knew their journey had only begun.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”

Genesis 12:1

No question, God was asking a great deal of Abram, including “giving up his inheritance and his right to family property.”¹⁶ You and I know courageous friends who’ve left behind loved ones and all their earthly possessions, headed for a distant mission field. I stand in awe of such commitment.

But God expected even more of Abram and Sarai. The Land I Will Show You doesn’t appear on any map. God didn’t explain the location of this unnamed land or how many years he intended Abram and company to stay there. God just said, “Go and I will show you.” Period. As callings go, this one was “dangerously open-ended.”¹⁷

I travel easier with a return ticket in my purse, don’t you?

That’s precisely why Abram and Sarai are celebrated for their faith: *they went*. And put their trust in the Lord—in Yahweh—a very different deity than the gods of Ur, tied to their ziggurats and statues. “Yahweh stands alone.”¹⁸ And moves around. And bids his people follow.

Two thousand years later God’s Son offered the same imperative: “Whoever serves me must follow me.”¹⁹ He neither drags us nor pushes us. Rather, the Lord Jesus walks ahead of us, planting footsteps in the sand so we’ll never lose sight of him. All of history affirms the wisdom of following God; Abram and Sarai were our pioneers. We’ll discover their imperfections soon enough. When we do, keep in mind the courage required to take that first step.

An Iron Will

Though the Lord spoke only to Abram, I feel certain the man shared every word with his wife. Who could keep quiet about astounding promises like these?

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” *Genesis 12:2*

If Sarai was present, you know she raised her hand on that first one. “A great nation? From a barren wife? Never happen.” We’re quick to see our limitations, yet God even more swiftly offers guarantees. Look at all these “I wills”!

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;...” *Genesis 12:3*

Tuck that in your memory bank for a certain scene not far down the pike when a whole household suffered under a curse because of this man. Finally God stated the most important point again.

“...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” *Genesis 12:3*

Abram and Sarai couldn’t have guessed what that would look like down the ages. Paul called it “the gospel in advance,”²⁰ preparing the way for the good news of God’s grace. “It was all laid out beforehand in Scripture that God would set things right with non-Jews by faith. Scripture anticipated this in the promise to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed in you.’”²¹

That blessing would come through Abram, yes, and also through the womb of a woman. Sarai was part of God’s plan for Abram from the beginning, though she didn’t know it yet—a detail that will soon become a major sticking point in our story. For the moment, “Sarai had nothing but Abram’s word on which to base the most radical move of her life.”²²

Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.
Genesis 12:4

Back then, seventy-five was the new forty, since the life span of a patriarch was nearly double our own.²³ Abram had another century ahead of him, and Sarai, ten years his junior, still had plenty of get-up-and-go. Good thing, since she got up and went.

He took his wife Sarai... *Genesis 12:5*

No protest, no complaining, no demands—at least not recorded in Scripture. So far Sarai gets a gold star for accepting God’s call on her husband’s life. If you’ve followed a spouse to a foreign mission field or a new job far from home, you, too, deserve an attagirl for your willingness to follow God *and* your mate.

We can picture these ancient travelers “in heavy leather sandals and loose woolen robes dyed in brilliant combinations of yellow, red, and blue”²⁴ as they made their way south. Unlike Lot’s wife in a later scene,²⁵ Sarai apparently didn’t look back, pining for the life and luxury she once knew. She pressed on, trusting her husband and the God who’d called them to a nomadic life.

Let’s face it: Abram “needed a plucky wife, and he got one.”²⁶

...and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Genesis 12:5

The weather in this part of the world is all about extremes, with torrential downpours quickly followed by bright blue skies. The landscape is varied as well: hills and deep valleys, fertile plains and stretches of wilderness.²⁷

Awandering Abram and Sarai went, past “the great tree of Moreh at Shechem,”²⁸ where the Lord appeared to Abram and promised the land to his offspring. No real estate for Abe, mind you, but at least the grandkids would have property to call their own. Marking the spot, Abram built an altar, then moved on to the hills east of Bethel, where he built another altar—“the first in the Holy Land”²⁹—and “called on the name of the LORD.”³⁰

Unfortunately, the couple’s joy in the land of promise was short lived. The ground beneath their feet soon became as barren as...well, you know.

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. *Genesis 12:10*

Famine plays a starring role in the Bible. Of some one hundred references, this is the first. According to geologists and archaeologists, during Abram’s lifetime a “massive three-hundred-year drought”³¹ ravaged the Canaanite countryside. No rain, no crops, no food.

Had I been Sarai, I'd have been seriously whining by this point. "Are you sure God wanted us in Canaan? Maybe he meant Canada. I told you we should have stopped and asked for directions..."

Desperate and hungry, Abram made tracks for the fertile land of the Pharaohs. We have no record that he checked with God or prayed for help when he headed west with his famished bride. Sister, you *know* trouble was on the horizon.

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are." *Genesis 12:11*

The Hebrew makes it clear she was "a fair woman to look upon" (KJV) and "beautiful in appearance" (NRSV). Even the Dead Sea Scrolls include a flattering description of Sarai: "how fine is the hair of her head, how pleasing her nose and all the radiance of her face."³²

Wait. Her *nose* was pleasing?

Historians say Cleopatra sported a distinctively large nose; maybe Egyptians fancied a prominent schnoz. Whatever Sarai's features, "her dignity, her bearing, her countenance"³³ all added up to an attractive female certain to catch Pharaoh's eye. And that was the problem.

"When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live." *Genesis 12:12*

In this culture "adultery was considered a very grievous offense,"³⁴ but there was no law against Pharaoh killing a man. Apparently, with the husband conveniently dispatched, his widow became fair game for this decadent ruler, who possessed "one of the largest harems in all the world."³⁵

Easy to forgive Abram for panicking. Not so easy to forgive his shameless request.

"Say you are my sister..." *Genesis 12:13*

Adding "I pray thee" (KJV) or "please" (NASB) didn't improve things. He was still asking his wife to lie. Okay, *half* lie. Since Sarai was his father's daughter by a different mother, she was his half sister.³⁶ But it still seems like

the coward's way out. More to the point, we have no record of God instructing Abram to head for Egypt. Looks like Abram acted on his own.

"...so that I will be treated well for your sake..." *Genesis 12:13*

"Because of their interest in you" (NLT), Abram told Sarai, "it may go well with me" (NASB). Humph. It would have been nicer if he'd said, "it may go well with *us*."

"...and my life will be spared because of you." *Genesis 12:13*

What about *her* life?

I realize Abram was Papa Patriarch, but I can't let his shoddy behavior slip by without comment. What kind of husband subjects his wife to moral and physical danger? "Faced with the threat of death, he surrenders what he ought not surrender."³⁷ Boy howdy.

Some commentators chalk up Abram's actions to "unbelief and distrust,"³⁸ seeing him as "an anxious man, a man of unfaith,"³⁹ whose "prime fault and folly...consisted in not waiting for the divine direction."⁴⁰ Others defend him, remarking that he hadn't traveled much and lived in "a rough and perilous time."⁴¹ Especially perilous for Sarai, I'd say.

When a scene like this unfolds, one does begin to wonder: Did Sarai's barrenness make her less valuable to him? Or was her love for Abram so powerful her husband knew she would do anything to spare his life?

Whatever the case, nascent Israel was "in danger of losing its ancestress."⁴²

Harem Scare 'Em

When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. *Genesis 12:14*

Just as Abram feared, "everyone spoke of her beauty" (NLT). All well and good to have a trophy wife—until someone wants your prize for his display case.

Back in 1963 Jimmy Soul crooned, "If you wanna be happy for the rest

of your life, never make a pretty woman your wife.”⁴³ Bet Abram was whistling that one under his breath as they neared the palace. In Scripture the mention of a woman’s beauty often portends disaster, since “beauty sets up the beautiful to be desired and taken.”⁴⁴ Ask Bathsheba or Dinah or Tamar, the sister of Absalom, how beauty can lead to tragedy.

Please talk to us, Sarai. Were you frightened when the Egyptians “took one look” and declared you “stunningly beautiful” (MSG)? Were you disgusted by their interest? Or secretly flattered? (We won’t tell.)

Alas, we’ll never know what she was thinking because Sarai remains maddeningly silent in this biblical scene, “a testimony to her powerlessness.”⁴⁵ At this juncture in our story, I can’t decide if she was Mostly Good because she obeyed her husband or Slightly Bad because she “consented to a deception.”⁴⁶

Here’s another possibility: maybe Sarai trusted God more than her husband did. Maybe she prayed to Yahweh to protect her or to provide a means of escape. Maybe she strolled into Pharaoh’s presence with her elegant nose held high, confident of God’s deliverance, knowing a lie on her part would not be necessary.

And when Pharaoh’s officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh,
and she was taken into his palace. *Genesis 12:15*

More specifically, “she was taken into his harem” (NLT). Since it was a supermarket-sized one, a few weeks may have gone by before Pharaoh noticed the comely addition. Sarai was a bit past her prime for those skimpy Egyptian costumes, but “Pharaoh would not hesitate to add a striking older woman to his harem to give variety.”⁴⁷ Think Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* or Helen Mirren in *Calendar Girls*.

As to Pharaoh’s officials, revered commentator Matthew Henry described them as “Pharaoh’s princes (his pimps rather).”⁴⁸ His *what*? Indeed, that centuries-old word suits the situation perfectly. According to Rev. Henry, these officials commended Sarai “not for that which was really her praise—her virtue and modesty, her faith and piety,” but for her beauty.⁴⁹

The more things change, the more they... Well, you know the rest.

It *is* encouraging to realize the Bible mentions a woman's appearance only when her story hinges on that fact. What the Lord applauds in his Word is a woman's character. In the whole of Proverbs 31—that litmus test for godly women—nothing is said of an ideal woman's physical appearance. No, not even the size of her nose. Instead, we learn she was dressed in dignity and feared God, for, after all, “beauty is fleeting.”⁵⁰

Speaking of which, Pharaoh clearly got a gander at Sarai and liked what he saw.

He treated Abram well for her sake... *Genesis 12:16*

Very well. Pharaoh didn't just spare the man's life; he showered him with goodies.

...and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. *Genesis 12:16*

No small outpouring. Obviously, “Pharaoh viewed Abram as nobility” and may have intended these gifts to serve “as an elaborate dowry for Sarai.”⁵¹

Dowry, as in a *wedding*? Didn't Abram see where this was going? Or was he too busy counting sheep?

Somebody please yell, “Stop!”

But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. *Genesis 12:17*

When it comes to timing, no chronometer on earth is the equal of God's stopwatch. At the perfect moment, in the nick of time, “Yahweh entered the scene.”⁵² And what a scene it was. “The LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues” (KJV), and “everybody in the palace got seriously sick” (MSG). *Ick.*

Don't blame the lettuce. Or spinach. Or contaminated irrigation water.

In the ancient world, “disease was considered the direct result of sin or some violation of custom.”⁵³ Pharaoh was no fool. He understood “a powerful deity was cursing him because of Sarai's presence in his household.”⁵⁴

And how did Pharaoh know that? Only two persons in the palace remained disease free: Abram and Sarai, who were surely avoiding Pharaoh like the plague.

So Pharaoh summoned Abram. “What have you done to me?” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife?” *Genesis 12:18*

He didn’t summon beautiful Sarai. Ohhh no. Pharaoh made sure the Hebrew head of the household took the heat on this one. The terseness of Pharaoh’s words and his rapid-fire questions make his anger apparent.

“Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ . . .” *Genesis 12:19*

Now that’s interesting. I thought Abram asked Sarai to lie. Apparently he went first.

“ . . .so that I took her to be my wife.” *Genesis 12:19*

I’m getting nervous here. What does Pharaoh mean by he “took her”? Some translations—“I made her my wife” (ICB) or “Now I’ve married her” (CEV)—give cause for concern. “Sarah seems to have had sexual relations with Pharaoh.”⁵⁵

Say it isn’t so! Not our silent Sarai, who trusted God to protect her.

Other translations offer a more hopeful view. “I might have taken her to me to wife” (KJV) or “Why were you willing to let me marry her?” (NLT) suggests their union was contemplated but not consummated. *Whew.*

Since God, with his flawless timing, acted here “not to punish Abraham for lying, but to protect Sarah from assault,”⁵⁶ he apparently intervened before Sarai’s virtue was compromised.

Pharaoh, as a gesture of respect, didn’t use Sarai’s name when he sent them packing.

“Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!” *Genesis 12:19*

Having scolded Abram for lying, Pharaoh evicted him from the country. The Egyptian couldn’t have made his wishes plainer: “be gone” (NRSV),

“go thy way” (KJV), “take her and get out!” (MSG). Okay, okay, they’re leaving already.

Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had. *Genesis 12:20*

“Everything” included servants. The sages of old believed that Pharaoh gave “his own daughter to Sarai, one that had been born to one of his concubines” to serve as Sarai’s handmaiden and that “her name was Hagar, and she was very young and strong.”⁵⁷ Though we have no biblical proof, I find it a credible story. More on that when we meet Hagar, who would one day serve this couple in ways they never could have predicted.

Still not a peep from Abe as the twosome were “whisked out of Egypt under military escort”⁵⁸ with their gifts in tow but their pride duly trampled. The nomadic followers of Yahweh, loaded down with gold and silver, flocks and herds, slowly moved “from place to place,”⁵⁹ “traveling by stages.”⁶⁰ When Abram and his nephew Lot began to cramp each other’s style, they went their separate ways.

Counting the Stars

Some time later Abram experienced his “first actual dialogue with God.”⁶¹ The Lord began by putting him at ease.

...the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

Genesis 15:1

In his Word, God says, “Fear not” (KJV) about seventy-five times, yet we can’t seem to hear it enough. I confess, fear nags at me constantly, as it does at many take-charge chicks. *Am I good enough? Have I done enough? Are others pleased with me?* Grabbing for control is our attempt to hold such fears at bay. Only when we realize God is in control can we truly let go of our apprehensions.

“Do not be afraid,” God says. To Abram, to Sarai, to us.

Fretful Abram didn't distinguish himself with his response, missing completely God's promise to guard him and crying out a lament that "implies a reproach."⁶²

But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" *Genesis 15:2*

Eliezer was Abram's chief servant. According to the law of the land, if Abram died without sons, his servant would become his heir. Once again the discussion centered on Sarai's barrenness, and Abram put the blame squarely on God: "you have given me everything I could ask for, except children" (CEV).

The Lord quickly quashed any notion of Abram's bestowing his inheritance on a servant.

"This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." *Genesis 15:4*

No question about it: Abram would father a son. And from that son would come countless more.

"Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." *Genesis 15:5*

We can hear Abram's mental wheels turning. *But I'm getting older. Sarai is barren.* How could such a seemingly impossible promise be fulfilled? By faith alone. And so our flawed but willing hero took that sacred leap.

Abram believed the LORD... *Genesis 15:6*

Don't let those words slip past you: "And he believed! Believed GOD!" (MSG).

Heavenly Father, help us see the enormity of this truth: a man filled with fear, filled with doubt, laid aside his limitations and was filled with faith. He simply *believed* in your spoken word. Without evidence or proof, without

knowing the details of how, when, or where, Abram “believed in (trusted in, relied on, remained steadfast to) the Lord” (AMP).

A perfect man? Pharaoh knew better, and so do we.

But God’s man? Absolutely.

...and he credited it to him as righteousness. *Genesis 15:6*

The word “credited” here is also translated “counted” (KJV) and “reckoned” (NASB). Simply put, a sizable deposit was made in Abram’s spiritual bank account. Riches not borrowed, but bestowed. Not earned, but inherited. Not a debit, but a credit.

“Righteousness” doesn’t refer to Abram’s good behavior or ours; it means “right standing with God” (AMP). Only the Lord can determine where we stand with him. Truth is, “Abram had no righteousness,” not of his own making. “And if he had not, no man had.”⁶³ No woman either. Not *this* woman, for sure!

When the prophet Isaiah moans, “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags,”⁶⁴ we moan right along with him, knowing how many times we’ve done good works for all the wrong reasons. But Isaiah didn’t quit there, beloved, nor should we: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.”⁶⁵ Even dressed in filthy rags, we are his. Even after lying to Pharaohs, we are his. Even while pushing and prodding our college-bound children, *we are his*.

“God declared him ‘Set-Right-with-God’ ” (MSG), and so he was. The gift the Lord gave Abram is the same gift he presents to us: a paid-in-full account of righteousness.

Considering that Sarai was barren and soon would be past the age of childbearing, Abram’s ability to believe in the promise of countless offspring required an enormous leap of faith—a leap only God could empower, a faith defined as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”⁶⁶

Did Sarai share her husband’s over-the-top faith? Let’s press on with her story and find out. You’ll see that the next chapter of Genesis opens with the word *now*, which is meant to “interrupt the flow of the story—that is, it marks the beginning of a new episode.”⁶⁷ And what an episode it is...

Sarai Takes Charge

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. *Genesis 16:1*

The poor woman. How many times have we gone over this? The fact that she “hadn't yet produced a child” (MSG) continued to trouble her because “there was no other way for a woman to be a member of society.”⁶⁸ Sarai had to be getting desperate.

She was seventy-five and her husband, eighty-five.

Too late, too late, too late.

Sister, when we stare anxiously at calendars and clocks rather than turn to God, we're looking in the wrong direction. Weary of numbering the wrinkles reflected in her polished brass mirror, Sarai cast her gaze toward a young servant.

But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar... *Genesis 16:1*

“But...” When I think of the times I've justified my rebellious behavior by tossing out that innocent word! If I've pegged her right, Sarai lined up excuses like tin cans on a fence, daring God to shoot them down.

“But my husband must have a son.”

“But I'm too old to be a mother.”

“But I have this slave girl...”

The young woman was a “handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar” (KJV). Just the word “Egyptian” reminds us of the incident with Pharaoh, of foreign people worshiping foreign gods, of *other*. “Hagar was on the outside looking in.”⁶⁹

Sarai and Hagar couldn't have been more different: one Hebrew, one Gentile; one married, one single; one wealthy, one poor; one a mistress, one a slave. Concerning the matter at hand, one woman was “brittle, aging, and barren,” while the other was “resilient, young, and fertile.”⁷⁰ I wonder if Sarai resented Hagar's youthful energy or if Hagar coveted Sarai's wealth and comfort. Whatever their relationship, Hagar was the property of her mistress. Hagar could not even call her womb her own, as we'll discover shortly.

Silent in the biblical account until this moment, Sarai finally spoke up.

...so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children." *Genesis 16:2*

Despite how inflammatory her words sound, Sarai was not blaming God per se, merely acknowledging what all believed to be true in her day: the Lord "restrained" (KJV) or "prevented" (NASB) women from bearing children for reasons known only to him. "GOD has not seen fit to let me have a child" (MSG), Sarai told Abram. Do you hear in her voice bitterness or sorrow? Was she angry or merely resigned? Any of those emotions would be valid, yet none of them are recorded in Scripture.

One scholar insisted her words bespoke "the usual impatience of unbelief,"⁷¹ but I'll stand up for Sarai on this one. She'd been exceedingly patient—with her husband, with her God, with her barrenness—from the day she married, as much as *sixty years* earlier. If her patience was running thin, no wonder. If her faith was waning, who could fault her?

At this crucial point, if she'd called out to God for strength, prayed to God for direction, or pleaded with God to open her womb, we would defend her without question. "Had Sarah said, Nature has failed me, but God is my resource, how different it would have been!"⁷²

But Sarai did not call on God. Instead, she came up with a ready remedy for the hubby-needs-an-heir problem. With her next words, our aging Princess tilted her crown at a defiant angle and a Slightly Bad Girl stepped forward.

"Go, sleep with my maidservant..." *Genesis 16:2*

No matter the translation, those words hit us like a slap. "Go *what*?!"

Remember how Abram added "I pray thee" when he asked Sarai to lie to the Egyptians? We find the same wheedling "I pray thee" (KJV) in this verse—except here we have an altogether different form of lying. Sarai didn't ask her man to catch forty winks with Hagar; she demanded that he "have sexual relations" (NCV), "have intercourse" (AMP), indeed "go in to my maid" (NASB).

Heavens! What was Sarai thinking?

Perhaps she decided that if she didn't do something, her husband might take another wife and leave her in disgrace. Or that her family's destiny rested solely in her hands and she needed to act. Or that if she waited much longer, Abram might be as incapable of fathering a child as she was of conceiving one. Whatever her reasoning, Sarai believed her infertility "forced her to find a way out of this embarrassment to her husband."⁷³

Hence, her forthright words to Abram: "Sleep with my maid" (MSG).

Scandalous as her plan appears, Sarai didn't come up with this on her own. An Assyrian marriage contract, dating from around 1900 BC, stipulated "if the wife does not give birth in two years, she will purchase a slave woman for the husband."⁷⁴ Still, no matter how common that solution was in her culture, *Sarai was not of that culture*. God had set apart Abram and Sarai. His promises were extended to no other man or woman on earth.

Tempting as it is to wag my finger at Sarai, I see in my own life the same willingness to follow the law of the land rather than God's command. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus said.⁷⁵ Yet when April 15 draws near and Caesar demands his due, I find myself staring at the figures on the 1040 form, wondering if there isn't *some* legal loophole we could slip part of our income through.

The Word tells us, "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed."⁷⁶ But Sarai had a better plan, or so she thought.

"...perhaps I can build a family through her." *Genesis 16:2*

By law Sarai could claim any child born to Hagar as her own. What would Hagar get out of the deal? A very wealthy husband.

"Liz, do you mean..."

I do.

"We have here the marriage of Abram to Hagar, who was his secondary wife."⁷⁷ Not a concubine or a mistress or a surrogate mother for his child. A *wife* in every sense of the word. Unbelievable as it sounds, Sarai was agreeing to "share her husband with another woman."⁷⁸

Swallow a Tums to calm your churning stomach and imagine for one awful moment that you were Sarai. What sort of woman would you choose

to play Hagar's role? Beautiful, for your husband's sake? Or unattractive, for yours? One writer thought Sarai selected "the most physically appealing, intelligent, spiritually evolved woman in her household."⁷⁹ If the goal was solely to produce a healthy, bright child, that approach sounds prudent. But if I were choosing a secondary wife for my husband, she'd be the plainest, dumbest woman in five states!

This much we do know: Sarai "was guilty of no light sin."⁸⁰ Without seeking God's direction in the matter, she chose "a Gentile idolater from a pagan country...to bear the promised seed."⁸¹

All was not lost, however. Abram still had to comply with his wife's audacious plan. A man who had spoken with God, who had faith in God's word, and who'd been declared righteous by a grace-giving God—surely this man would refuse to sin so egregiously.

Abram the Cave Man

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. *Genesis 16:2*

No resistance? No discussion? No seeking God's blessing before proceeding with this no-no? Uh...no. Abram "listened to the voice of Sarai" (NASB) and "heeded what Sarai said" (AMP).

We've heard this before: "Here, honey. Try this tasty fruit." From the beginning, women have gently but firmly bent their husbands to their will, sometimes without saying a word. Abram offered "no more protest to his wife's plan than Adam had to Eve's picnic in paradise."⁸²

Admit it: we women often get what we want through not-so-subtle persuasion, verbal agility, and emotional expression. At least, that's how it works in our family. We live in the old farmhouse I fell in love with and drive the Toyota I picked out. Does my dear husband have an opinion? Of course. My husband, Bill, is also a peacemaker, and granting my wishes gives him what *he* wants: harmony at the Higgs house.

I can see Abram nodding (and Sarai glaring at me for giving away our time-honored tactics) as her husband sought "to buy conjugal peace at

almost any price.”⁸³ How else to explain why Abram, after attaining such spiritual heights, caved “to domestic pressure, pliant under his wife’s planning and scolding”?⁸⁴

Sarai was a Slightly Bad Girl, all right, married to a Slightly Bad Boy who didn’t hesitate to follow her advice, “guided by reason and *the voice of Sarai*... not of the Lord.”⁸⁵

So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. *Genesis 16:3*

The date stamp—ten years in Canaan—helps us keep track of things. And note who was in charge. “Sarai gave Hagar to her husband Abram” (NCV). Sarai was no innocent bystander, simply making suggestions. She “took” and “gave,” just like Eve, who “took some and...gave some to her husband.”⁸⁶

Hagar’s foreign nationality is emphasized here for good reason: hers was not the womb God intended for Abram’s seed. Could the Lord have made Hagar barren as well? Easy answer: of course. Then why didn’t he? Tricky answer, soon to follow.

The Egyptian maid’s new role was clear: “to be his wife” (KJV), the same Hebrew word used to describe Abram’s relationship with Sarai, who “voluntarily granted to Hagar all the rights and privileges of a full-fledged wife.”⁸⁷ I can’t fathom how difficult that must have been for Sarai, and yet by law these rights were necessary for Hagar’s offspring to qualify as Abram’s legitimate heir.⁸⁸

What Sarai went through to be a mother!

Had she and Abram sought God’s help, surely the Lord would have responded. Instead, they pressed on with a desperate human solution rather than seek divine intervention. With little fanfare, Abram “married without God’s consent.”⁸⁹

He slept with Hagar... *Genesis 16:4*

Naturally, much more than sleeping was involved. Poor Sarai, waiting alone in her tent, trying not to imagine Abram and Hagar together. (Frankly,

I'd rather not picture it either. An octogenarian sharing a bed with a woman young enough to be his great-granddaughter? Draw the tent curtains, please.)

Poor Hagar, too, with no choice whatsoever in the matter—both women victimized by a social system that “valued women only for their reproductive capacity.”⁹⁰

...and she conceived. *Genesis 16:4*

The rabbis of old insist Hagar conceived “after the first intimacy with Abram,”⁹¹ proving beyond any doubt Abram’s virility. How the news of Hagar’s pregnancy must have confounded our Sarai! A flutter of joy, knowing she would soon hold her husband’s heir on her knees, followed by sorrow, realizing her empty womb was indeed to blame all along.

Here’s my question: if Sarai wanted an heir for Abram, why didn’t she choose someone from her own tribe? By pairing her Hebrew husband with an Egyptian wife, “she originated a rivalry which has run in the keenest animosity through the ages, and which oceans of blood have not quenched.”⁹²

We’re about to see the seeds of that rivalry—planted in the proud heart of Hagar and fertilized by Sarai’s jealousy—take root in a scene “so true to human nature that it is difficult to understand how any one could ever imagine that this story was fiction.”⁹³

Like a Woman Scorned

When [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. *Genesis 16:4*

“Despise.” One word gives us the whole ugly picture: a pregnant, haughty servant looking down her nose at a barren, miserable wife.

“Humiliated in the very core of her heart,”⁹⁴ Sarai prepared to reveal “the less pleasant side of her character.”⁹⁵ I’ll say! The woman unleashed a diatribe filled with “tempestuous wrath”⁹⁶ and “righteous rage”⁹⁷ meant to knock Abram back on his heels.

Honey, she was *livid*.

Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.” *Genesis 16:5*

Before you jump to conclusions (as I did at first blush), Sarai was not placing all the blame on Abram for Hagar’s presumptuous behavior. While other translations read, “May the wrong done to me be on you!” (NRSV) and “It’s all your fault!” (NLT), the Hebrew text indicates Sarai was merely reminding her husband that, as the head of the household, he alone had the power to fix things. And she wanted them fixed, pronto.

This whole scene constitutes “a judicial, legal proceeding.”⁹⁸ Wives had certain rights, and Sarai was about to assert hers. To me, the text reads like a *Law & Order* script—one of those episodes when a female attorney doesn’t let Assistant D.A. Jack McCoy get a word in edgewise. We can imagine Sarai pacing the courtroom floor, her dark eyes flashing, her Near Eastern complexion burnished to a high color by the heat of her words.

“I put my servant in your arms...” *Genesis 16:5*

Sarai gets points for honesty. No hedging here. “I myself gave her the privilege of sleeping with you” (NLT). This, too, was “recognized legal phraseology”⁹⁹ but also “pointedly sexual.”¹⁰⁰

“...and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me.”

Genesis 16:5

Here’s what Sarai was so steamed about: she expected her husband to speak up for her rather than meekly stand by while an uppity servant-turned-wife usurped her authority. Hagar turned out to be “the unforeseen wild card”¹⁰¹ in this Royal Game of Err.

As mistress of the household, Sarai held the oldest and first rights,¹⁰² and she knew the law of the land was on her side: “If a slave promoted to be a wife could not hold the new position with proper decorum, she was to return to her former state.”¹⁰³ Nebraska maybe. Or Texas. Somewhere far away from Canaan.

With all eyes fixed on her, Sarai offered her closing argument.

“May the LORD judge between you and me.” *Genesis 16:5*

How disheartening to hear Sarai speak to Abram in so harsh a manner: “The LORD will make you pay for doing this to me!” (NLT). When Sarai cried, “Let the LORD decide who is right—you or me” (NCV), commentators suggest she was alluding to the time in Egypt when Abram asked her to lie on his behalf, a “morally repugnant” request.¹⁰⁴

Oh, *that*. Some married people keep a detailed account of their partners’ wrongdoings, using them like sharply tipped arrows when skirmishes arise. But Abram chose not to engage in battle and instead let Sarai win without releasing a single shaft.

“Your servant is in your hands,” Abram said. *Genesis 16:6*

With those words—a legal pronouncement—Hagar was reduced to her former role as a mere maidservant under Sarai’s authority.¹⁰⁵ “Your slave-girl is in your power” (NRSV), Abram told her. “Your maid is your business” (MSG).

Boy, that was quick. Maybe he’d sensed God’s displeasure long before Sarai expressed hers. Maybe he’d grown weary of watching these two women snap at each other like Nile crocodiles. Or maybe he’d realized what a mess he and Sarai had made of things and so “voluntarily dismissed the wife who had been given to him.”¹⁰⁶

Whatever Abram’s reasoning, his next words send a chill down my spine.

“Do with her whatever you think best.” *Genesis 16:6*

Dangerous, to give a wronged wife that sort of license. “Do anything you want to her” (NCV), Abram said. “Deal with her as you see fit” (NLT). See why I’m nervous?

Sarai had asked Abram to take responsibility as head of the household. Instead, he avoided it. More troubling still, we sense “no compassion, affection, or even concern for Hagar’s welfare”¹⁰⁷ on Abram’s part even though he’d embraced her and filled her with his seed. Now he was “abandoning the

woman carrying his child to the fury of her jealous rival”¹⁰⁸ without doing anything to protect Hagar *or* his future heir.

Boggles the mind, doesn't it? Abram, “the father of us all,”¹⁰⁹ behaving like a deadbeat dad.

As for Sarai, she grabbed that “power and freedom, and she became relentless.”¹¹⁰

Mean Girls

Then Sarai mistreated Hagar;... *Genesis 16:6*

“Mistreated” can mean a lot of things. Did Sarai make Hagar work harder than ever, despite her pregnancy, assigning “excessively numerous menial tasks”?¹¹¹ Or by dealing “harshly with her” (NRSV), does the Bible mean Sarai threw cruel words at her maid like stones, hard and sharp, meant to inflict pain? If she “dealt severely with her, humbling and afflicting her” (AMP), we have a clearer picture of how difficult this must have been for Hagar.

But the closest translation to the original Hebrew is this: “Sarai was abusive to Hagar” (MSG). That is, she literally “applied force to her, treated her with violence.”¹¹²

Oh, Sarai. How could you? Hagar did only what you asked her to do.

Yes, Hagar was boastful, and her attitude was vexing. Yes, she was a servant, and you were her mistress. Correct her in some proper way if you must. But to hurt her, to strike her, to treat her as something less than human—that was hardly the behavior of a godly woman. To think “our revered foremother, a woman of deep spirituality” could be so abusive! “What a cautionary message for all of us.”¹¹³

Yes, *all* of us, beloved. I'm not tempted to lift my hand against friend or foe, but I can strike with words as sharp as flint, especially when I feel wronged, slighted, or ignored. Instead of just biting my tongue, maybe I should glue it to the roof of my mouth with peanut butter—anything to keep from hurting others with my words, or worse, as Sarai apparently did.

You'll be relieved to know this wasn't the end of Sarai's story. Happier days awaited our fallen princess, including a new name, a personal encounter with the God of Abraham, and a long-anticipated answer to her prayers. We'll examine the next season of Sarai's life in chapter 3. Yet our time spent in this barren stretch has been fruitful, if only to reveal our own flawed natures.

Have I ever lambasted my husband, as Sarai did? Sorry to say, I have.

Did I make those who once worked for me feel less than appreciated on occasion? To my discredit, I did.

Are there times I should have prayed rather than plotted? Trusted God instead of crafting my own foolish plans? Waited rather than acted? A thousand times, yes.

If you'd rather think of Sarai as a saintly role model who never stumbled, "that would rob Sarah of her human dimension—and deprive us of the lessons we can learn."¹¹⁴ She was human, just as we are, and, as such, her story gives us hope.

The Lord wasn't finished with Sarai of Ur, and he isn't finished with you and me. He loves us far too much to let us soak in our sinfulness or drown in our guilt. Slightly Bad Girls we may be, but what a truly good God is he.

Let's spend a moment reflecting on the truths we've gleaned thus far from Sarai's life. Then we'll catch up with Hagar, a woman whose story is about to take a dramatic turn.

What Lessons Can We Learn from Sarai?

For those who love God, there are no white lies.

When Abram begged Sarai, "Say you are my sister," he was asking her to tell a white lie—a supposedly harmless untruth meant to serve a useful purpose. But there's nothing harmless about lying. God doesn't want us to fib to save our necks or anyone else's. If even those we love and trust ask us to speak deceitfully—"When so-and-so calls, say I'm not here" or "Tell our accountant that trip was a business expense"—we can respectfully decline and seek a better solution that meets their needs yet honors God.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully
to his neighbor. *Ephesians 4:25*

Know when it's time for a new wardrobe.

In the early years of Sarai's married life, she was "clothed...with joy"¹¹⁵—following Abram on his God-led journey without question or complaint, tramping across the desert, doing all that her husband asked. But when the years of barrenness took their toll, her patience wore as thin as an old woolen robe, and her treatment of those closest to her grew as rough as the leather straps on her worn-out sandals. *What Not to Wear*, circa 1800 BC. We can learn from Sarai's fashion faux pas and choose instead to dress in spiritual garments that never go out of style.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe
yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and
patience. *Colossians 3:12*

Trusting in the Lord is the best plan.

The psalmist sang out, "Trust in the LORD,"¹¹⁶ calling on God's people to let the sovereign Lord be their guide. But when our patience runs out, trust often goes along with it. We give up on God ever answering our prayers and start looking for quick fixes. We stop listening to the advice of others and make hasty, often regrettable decisions. Sarai exhibited many admirable traits, but her take-charge-rather-than-trust-God plan was not one of them. Let's lift a page from her life and turn it upside down: depending on God rather than seeking easy solutions, and heeding wise counsel rather than charging ahead without counting the cost.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own
understanding. *Proverbs 3:5*

Tempers are safest when tempered.

Tempered steel is heated, then cooled to make the metal become stronger. When our tempers flare, as Sarai's did with both Hagar and Abram, we can

try dousing our anger with cold truth. What are we *really* so hot about? Are we too focused on the weaknesses of others to see our own failings? Is some deep-seated disappointment from the past interfering with our ability to act fairly now? Is our anger righteous or sparked by nothing more than pride and envy? In the heat of the moment, let's pause long enough for our tempers to cool, knowing we'll be stronger for the effort...and won't send others running for safety.

Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy? *Proverbs 27:4*

Good Girl Thoughts Worth Considering

1. What was your opinion of Sarai *before* you studied her story in Genesis 11–16? And what do you think of her now? Based on your personal experience or observation, what are the blessings of being married to a man uniquely called by God? And what are the challenges?

2. Sarai is the first woman in Scripture described as barren. Since “children are a gift from the LORD,”¹¹⁷ to what end might God have closed Sarai's womb for a long season? Is childbearing still a source of esteem for women? What are some ways modern society measures the worth of a woman? How do you measure your own worth?

3. Abram and Sarai left everything—family and friends, houses and lands, and all their worldly goods that wouldn't fit on a camel—to follow God's leading. If the Lord asked you to leave everything and follow his lead, how would you respond? The Lord made several “I will” statements to Abram, promising to bless him and to make him famous. How might such promises increase your faith?

4. When you learned that Sarai was a beautiful woman, in what way did that alter your perception of her? Did you fear for her in Pharaoh's court or

assume her pleasing appearance would protect her? In our culture how is beauty an advantage? A disadvantage?

5. In Genesis 15, God told Abram he would father a son from his own seed but did not mention the mother's name. How might the story have unfolded differently if God had said, "And Sarai will bear this son"? Since we know "his way is perfect,"¹¹⁸ why do you think God withheld this vital fact? Ten years passed before Sarai took steps to secure an heir for Abram. What do you suppose finally prompted her to act?

6. When Sarai gave Hagar to her husband, how had she "opened the door to spiritual catastrophe"?¹¹⁹ In what ways did Hagar's quick conception make matters worse for Sarai? In your own life, when have you taken your future into your own impatient hands without seeking God's guidance? And what was the outcome?

7. According to her tersely presented prosecution, Sarai wanted Abram to rectify the situation. Describe the "wrong" she was suffering (Genesis 16:5). Once again, Sarai did not turn to the Lord for help. What reason would you offer? This chapter of Sarai's life ended on a distressing note. Have you lost respect for her, or are you willing to give her another chance? Explain why.

8. What's the most important lesson you learned from Sarai, a princess bride who ran out of patience?