

Genesis 17:1–9 (NRSV)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

⁹ God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

Genesis 21:1–7, 15–17 (NRSV)

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’ ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’

Romans 4:20 (NRSV)

²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

Galatians 5:22–23 (NRSV)

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Having patience is trusting God enough to remain faithful, even in suffering.

Ask my wife, Patti. I am not a patient person and I suffer for it. Isn't it silly that I get distressed because I picked the wrong line at the supermarket. But some waiting brings real suffering. Have you ever been impatiently waiting for test

results from your doctor? That anxiety is real – and that is the key to understanding the deeper, truer meaning of patience. Here is Karen Swallow Prior on patience:

That “suffering” is the meaning of the root word for patience is made clear by the fact that we also use the word patient to refer to someone under medical care. The patient is someone “suffering” from an ailment—not merely waiting. Patient shares the same root as the word “passion,” which also means “suffering.” Someone who has a passion—a passion for music, a passion for soccer, a passion for a person—suffers on behalf of that love. When we speak in the church about “the passion of Christ,” it literally refers to the suffering of Christ on the cross on our behalf. The overlap between the words suffering and patience can be seen in another meaning of both words: “permit.” When Jesus said, “Suffer little children . . . to come unto me” (as Matthew 19:14 is rendered in the King James), he meant “permit” them to come. And when we speak of women’s suffrage, we refer to women being permitted to vote. The word permit in these contexts suggests willingness; the willingness to endure suffering is the meaning of the word “patient.” The expression “the patience of Job,” describing the great test of faith Job underwent in the Bible, refers to Job’s suffering, not merely his endurance. As connected as patience is to suffering, it is no wonder that, as theologian N. T. Wright points out, we “applaud patience but prefer it to be a virtue that others possess.”¹

Like all the virtues, patience is the mean between an excess and a deficiency. Patience keeps our anger from running away with us to an unrighteous wrath. Anger is the proper response to injustice and other wrongs, but our anger can quickly accelerate until we are committing wrong ourselves. Conversely, a deficiency of patience is seen in apathy, sloth, and disinterest. Being patient doesn’t mean we don’t care!

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of suffering and patience, grounded in their trust in God (Genesis 15:6). They were very old and had no sons or daughters. No sons to provide for them and protect them. No daughters to care for them as they aged. No grandchildren in whom they could delight. To make it worse, childlessness fell hard on the wife as it was seen to be her fault and her shame. Many even saw it as a mark of having sinned against some angry god.

But God would have the last word. Abraham and Sarah would have to be patient, at which they did little better than most of us.

Abraham laughs

Abraham laughs at God! Can you really blame him. He is 100 years old. Sarah is ninety. And yet, God has promised that she will bear a son from whom will spring a great nation. How could such a thing be? It’s just silly and, surely, God is silly to promise it.

Before we jump on Abraham for scoffing at God’s promises, we’d best put ourselves in his shoes. First, Abraham has no conception that the unnamed²

¹ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² God would not reveal God’s name to Abraham. Moses learns God’s name, YHWH, at the burning bush in the Sinai Wilderness (Exodus 3). It is always important to try to avoid

god to whom he has been speaking is the one and only Creator and Lord. So far as Abraham knows, the god who called him is one among many. Second, Abraham has no reason to think that this god is omniscient, omnipotent, or anything like it. The gods worshipped in the ancient near-east were a numerous, varied, and capricious bunch, who made as much trouble as anything else.

But to really understand this story, we have to go back to the beginning . . . way back.

A promise made

In the beginning, God made everything there is. And God pronounced it good. God made humans in God's image and gave them a beautiful place to live and work and walk with God. But desiring to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed it all away, wrecking their relationship with God and taking creation down with them.

But, by grace and grace alone, God set about to put things right, choosing Noah and his family as a fresh start. That didn't work out either. As soon as Noah and kin emerged from the boat, things began to fall apart. Again, the humans tried to make themselves like gods, building a tower to the heavens.

So again . . . and still by grace and grace alone . . . God set about to put things right, to restore all of creation, to make right God's relationship with humanity, to bring justice and mercy to an unjust and merciless world. And this time, God chose a man named Abram³ and his wife Sarai to be the ones through whom things would be put right.

God chooses them and makes a profound, cosmos-changing, yet simple set of promises. God will give them a land. They will be the parents of a great nation. All the families of the earth . . . yes, all . . . will be blessed through them (Genesis 12:1-3). God elaborates on this (see esp. Genesis 15), but those are the basics. A family for Abram and Sarai that will have a land of their own and through whom God's work of renewal and restoration will sweep across the planet and all its people.

As a sign of this promise, God instructs Abram that all the males of his family are to be circumcised. It is not that the circumcision is a condition of God's promises being kept. Rather, circumcision is a sign, an outward marker, a baptism of sorts into the family through whom God is working in a special and focused way. There is no deal on the table, just God's promises.

Blameless?

In 17:1, God tells Abram, "I am El Shaddai; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant⁴ between you and me." It would be a mistake to think that God has introduced a condition here, as if God says: *if* you are

importing the full revelation of God that Jesus brings when we turn to the Old Testament. Monotheism would not come to flower among the Israelites until more than a thousand years after Abraham.

³The given names of the couple are Abram and Sarai. After establishing his promises to them, God changes their names to Abraham (meaning "father" or "ancestor") and Sarah (meaning "princess").

⁴"Covenant" carries a connotation of mutuality which a promise doesn't. This covenant begins to take on the trappings of near-east covenants between rulers and subjects with the odd ritual of 15:7-21.

blameless, *then* I'll put the world right. God *is* going to restore the cosmos, all the families *will* be blessed. God is not only the great promise maker but the great promise keeper.⁵ But will it be through Abraham?⁶ Abraham could back out. God will not violate even his free will.

And what does God expect from Abraham if he is to be the bearer of new creation?⁷ Faithfulness. The Hebrew word translated “blameless” doesn’t speak to sinlessness but to faithfulness. God and Abraham are to belong to one another: “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Abraham demonstrates his own commitment to faithful relationship by falling on his face before God. In all that follows, it will always be this mutual faithfulness that lies at the heart of the covenant. It is Abraham’s faithfulness that is tested by God when he tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It is Abraham’s faithfulness that is lifted up by Paul in Romans 4 when he seeks to show that the story of God and his people has always been a story about faithfulness. It is Jesus’ faithfulness that enables God’s promises to be kept at last. It is faithfulness that God expects of each of us.

But what happens next reveals Abraham’s lack of patience and perhaps even reveals his fear of the commitment he has made.

Yes, a son

Sadly, right after Abraham falls on his face, demonstrating his commitment to be faithful, he immediately demonstrates that he doesn’t really get it. It is reminiscent of the disciples’ own blindness to the truth of Jesus’ vocation and ministry; e.g. the disciples fought over who is the greatest as Jesus prepares for his own death (Luke 22:24-29). Abraham commits himself to a faithful relationship and then immediately scoffs at the idea that God could actually do what God promised. Ninety-year old women don’t have babies! Besides, isn’t Ishmael⁸ enough? Abraham asks.

Regardless of how impossible it seems, Sarah is to have a son of her own. Why? Because God has promised it – and, of course, God’s promises will be kept.

A bit later, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three men who are, unbeknownst to the couple, actually God in the company of two angels. When Sarah overhears a conversation about her having a baby, she laughs at the very idea. Yet, God tellingly asks, “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”

⁵Bearing this in mind becomes all important when we come to Paul’s letters in the New Testament. The book of Romans is Paul’s defense of God’s righteousness: God made a promise and, yes, God has kept and is keeping that promise – even if it doesn’t look like it much of the time. I’m very excited to be teaching a Bible Academy class on Romans this fall. I’ll be teaching it twice: Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings. More info and registration for the fall session will soon be ready at the Bible Academy’s website: www.thebibleacademy.com.

⁶It is at this point in the story that God changes Abram’s name to Abraham.

⁷Note how the language of this section is tied to the “fruitfulness” language of the creation stories at the beginning of Genesis.

⁸When God first tells Abraham and Sarah that they are to have a son, Sarah, knowing she is far past childbearing years, takes matters into her own hands and sends a slave girl, Hagar, to her husband. Abraham is to impregnate Hagar so he can have his heir. Of course, that isn’t God’s plan and the whole episode with Hagar and the baby, Ishmael, turns out badly. God declares that Sarah is to give birth to a son herself. Not only does Abraham laugh at the idea, but so does Sarah (Genesis 18:12).

Of course nothing is too wonderful for God. God is involved in this world and in our lives every day. Most of the time, God's work goes little noticed or not at all. But sometimes, God surprises us in a big way, something out of left field, something that we would have thought to be impossible. We might even call it a miracle, which is alright, so long as we remember that God works through very ordinary people and very ordinary means much more often than through "miracles."

Will we trust God?

In the end, like Abraham and Sarah (and Job!), we are left with one question: Will we trust God? It is trust in God that enables our patience in the midst of wrong and suffering. We are then confident that fixing all wrongs is not on our shoulders alone, nor is the alleviation of all suffering. We are called to lessen suffering, to avoid sloth and indifference, but we also must have the patience not to get swept up toward bad ends in our anger.

In closing, a bit more from Karen Swallow Prior:

N. T. Wright says that patience is required in order to attain the other virtues. "Patience is one of the places where faith, hope, and love meet up," he writes. Augustine describes patience as the virtue by which "we tolerate evil things with an even mind." The patient person, he continues, chooses to bear evil rather than to commit further evil in response to it. Patience keeps us from yielding to evils that are "temporal and brief" and from losing "those good things which are great and eternal." Patience is a high virtue, that's certain. No wonder patience is traditionally understood to be a subvirtue of courage. Indeed, all the virtues, Aquinas says, "are directed to the good of the soul." He continues: "Now this seems to belong chiefly to patience; for it is written (Luke 21:19): 'In your patience you shall possess your souls.' Therefore patience is the greatest of the virtues."⁹

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Judges*

This class will continue our study of the book of Judges.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

NO CLASS THIS WEEK (OCT 15) DUE TO HVAC WORK IN PIRO HALL

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

⁹ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: Continuing *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.