

A SIX-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white robe, is shown from the chest up. She is looking down at her hands, which are cupped together and holding a small amount of gold dust. A stream of gold dust is falling from her hands. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color. The text is overlaid on the image in a dark purple serif font, with the words 'Shaped', 'by God's', and 'Promises' arranged vertically. The text is set against a background of white, torn-paper-like shapes.

Shaped  
by God's  
Promises

LESSONS FROM SARAH ON FEAR AND FAITH

Shannon Popkin

“This study of Sarah’s life through disappointment, testing, and wilderness waiting will help you exchange your fears, defaults, and doubts for a faith with feet as you discover God’s absolute faithfulness. Through practical illustrations, real-life examples, and Scripture application, *Shaped by God’s Promises* will help you walk the wait with unwavering faith.”

—**Lisa Appelo**, author of *Life Can Be Good Again: Putting Your World Back Together After It All Falls Apart*

“Waiting on God can either create a lot of anxiety or be one of the sweetest times of your journey. Shannon Popkin’s six-week Bible study is full of wisdom, hope, and encouragement for how to enjoy the seasons in between the mountaintops. *Shaped by God’s Promises: Lessons from Sarah on Fear and Faith* will teach you practical ways to invite God to transform your heart and mind as you learn to thrive while trusting his unbreakable promises and his greater plan.”

—**Linda Barrick**, speaker, writer, and founder of Hope Out Loud

“*Shaped by God’s Promises* will inspire you to know, believe, and rehearse God’s promises when life isn’t following the path you hoped. Shannon invites us to trust God, as Abraham and Sarah did (or didn’t), beautifully tracing their story as they waited years to see the fulfillment of what God had spoken. I was encouraged to rest in God’s faithfulness and I know you will be too!”

—**Vaneetha Risner**, author of *Desperate for Hope* and *Walking through Fire*

“If you’ve ever felt overwhelmed by fear when you longed to experience faith, this study is for you! Shannon Popkin wisely leads us through the biblical life of Sarah with clarity, winsomeness, and truth. And what we find as we dive into the Word is the beautiful news that fear doesn’t have to be constantly nipping at our heels; we can be women who walk in faith in every season of life, as Sarah learned to do.”

—**Ann Swindell**, author of *The Path to Peace* and owner of Writing with Grace

“What does God promise us, and what does it look like to believe him? In her thorough examination of Sarah’s life and faith, Shannon shows us what it means to be shaped by God’s promises—to live like everything God says is true. Here you will find an in-depth searching of Scripture, valuable insights, and help for growing in your faith, ultimately because Shannon will point you to Jesus, the perfect promise-shaped Son.”

—**Kristen Wetherell**, author of *Help for the Hungry Soul* and *Fight Your Fears*

“For the woman waiting on God, wondering when he’ll answer or wrestling over why he’s taking so long, Shannon offers fresh hope in Scripture, reminding you that you are never forgotten, forsaken, or overlooked. Grab a copy of *Shaped by God’s Promises*, allowing God to hold your heart while he holds your hand to guide you into the glorious future he has for you.”

—**Erica Wiggenhorn**, national speaker with Aspire Women’s Events and award-winning author of *An Unexpected Revival: Experiencing God’s Goodness through Disappointment and Doubt*

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# Shaped by God's Promises

LESSONS FROM SARAH ON FEAR AND FAITH

Shannon Popkin



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To my parents, Roger and Judie Berry  
Your love for God's promises created a foundation for my faith.

# How to Be Shaped by God's Promises

God's promises aren't like mine; just ask my kids. I used to tell them, "I promise I'll pick you up on time today. I *promise*." But then there would be a traffic backup. Or I'd drop a carton of eggs just before getting out the door. Or I'd bump into a friend at the grocery store and lose track of time as we chatted away. My promises were often derailed by unforeseen circumstances that prevented me from keeping them.

God, however, doesn't have unforeseen circumstances. He has control over the whole world and everything in it, which means he *can* keep every one of his promises. And he does!

God's promises are like a set of parentheses. When he makes a promise, he lays down the first parenthesis, and when he keeps the promise, he closes the set. Like parentheses, God's promises always come in pairs; you never have one without the other. But often, there is far more space between the parentheses than we expect.



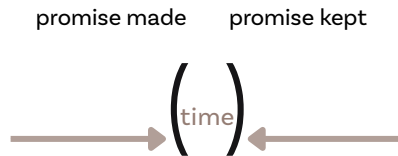
Now, because these promises come from God (not your chronically late mom), you can cling to them tightly, with great expectation—and I hope you do! But clinging to the promises isn't the hard part.

## A Thinner Story

As God’s people, we’re often big fans of the promises. We love to rehearse them and comfort ourselves with what is to come. We have t-shirts and tumblers inscribed with the phrase, “God always keeps his promises.” What we don’t like, however, is the gap on the timeline between the two parentheses. We don’t want to experience the “cling in between.” We’d rather just pull the parentheses in close.



*I’ve created some lists of promises for you in the back of the book, which I’ll be referring to throughout the study. Appendix 1 on page 287 offers you three questions to ask yourself when approaching the promises. (Hint: Not all of the promises are for all people.) Appendix 2 on page 291 divides up the promises into three lists, with room for you to add more as you discover them in your Bible. Take a minute to familiarize yourself with this section of the book.*



The reality? There are many promises from God that we won’t see fulfilled in our lifetime. Try putting that on a tumbler. It’s uncomfortable. We don’t like it. We have Amazon expectations of next-day delivery.

To soothe our agitation, we mentally collapse the timeline and pull the parentheses in close—even in the way we read the Bible. Just think about the songs we sing, the memes we create, and the conversations we have. We delete that huge gap between Genesis 3 and Matthew 1 and jump from sin to the cross, all in the same sentence.

Now, I understand the sentiment. Who wants to linger on sin and death (introduced by Adam

and Eve) when you can flip over to forgiveness and eternal life (provided by Jesus)? Yet here's my question: Is it okay to reduce our Bibles to a much thinner story? I doubt any of us would physically rip out the parts in the middle to create a simpler, cleaner storyline. But when we force the parentheses in tight, wanting to skip to the good part, do we lose anything?

**Have you spent more time studying the Old Testament or New Testament of your Bible? Why?**

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**What might be lost if we skipped the parts of our Bible leading up to Jesus's birth?**


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**What might be gained if we lingered?\***

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*\*In this third question, I'm asking you to "infer," or to reason and draw out implications based on what you already know about the Bible. If you are just beginning to study the Bible or don't have any thoughts about that particular question (or others like it in this study), I don't want you to get bogged down. Perhaps something you read later will trigger an idea, and you can return to it. If you need permission to leave some questions blank, it's yours. There's value in considering and pondering, even if you don't have a tidy answer, and that's what questions like this one are meant to prompt.*



*\*Yes, this is  
grammatically  
impossible, but work  
with me!*

## Don't Skip the Good Part

In this six-week study of the life of Sarah, we'll study Genesis 12–21, which falls in that long stretch of time between the initial sin and the life of Jesus.

Back in Genesis 3:15, in the wake of evil entering the world, God promised that the woman's offspring would crush the snake and eradicate evil. Then, after hundreds of years pass, God opens another set of parentheses\* and promises to bless all the nations of the world through a man named Abram (Genesis 12:3). It's still early in the overarching story of the Bible, so Abram and his wife Sarai have lots of unanswered questions on how and when God will keep this promise. However, it seems they know that somewhere along the line, their family tree (which currently has no branches) will produce the promised snake-crushing Savior (John 8:56).

Let's stop and think for a moment. Why is the story of "the Abrams" (as I like to call them) even necessary to the plot? Couldn't we scoop out the centuries it takes God to "make of [Abram] a great nation" (Genesis 12:2), and skip to the good part where Jesus comes to die for our sin?

I hope that by the end of this study, you'll be convinced that the stretch between the parentheses *is* one of the good parts. But for now, let me assure you: God, the author of the Bible, has good things in mind when he inserts long stretches of time between making and keeping his promises.



## (The Tension of an Open Parenthesis)

If you're a grammar girl, you probably find this unpaired parenthesis in my heading annoying. (Here, I'll close one for you.) But consider how it also holds your attention. Does it feel like a cupboard door is open and needs to be closed? That's how we're meant to feel when we read God's promises in the Bible that have not been fulfilled. Each unpaired parenthesis is meant to hold our attention and build our anticipation for what's to come.

My husband and I had the opposite experience last week when we decided to try a Netflix show our daughter had recommended. We started watching it without realizing she had signed into her account on our TV, so without meaning to, we picked up where she had left off—which was the fifth season. By the time we discovered our mistake, we had stumbled upon several key plot details. When we started over in Season One, these spoilers made the show far less exciting.

God is a masterful storyteller who doesn't spoil things by skipping too quickly to future "seasons." As the story unfolds slowly, with yet-unfulfilled promises, tension builds and our attention is held. These open parentheses feel like a song with no final note or a book with no final page. As we turn the pages of our Bible, we wonder, *Can God keep his promises? Will he?*

This is the main tension in the story of Sarah. We're first introduced to her this way: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). Then, only verses later, God promises her husband, "I will make of you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2).

Can you imagine Sarai’s heart leaping with glee? If Abram was to be the father of a nation, this meant Sarai would be the *mother* of a nation! The first parenthesis had been put in place. But then came her next period (not the punctuation sort). And the next, and the next, until there were no more. And we wonder along with Sarai, *Can God keep his promises? Will he?* Supposing we believe he will, a new question emerges as the gap between the parentheses widens: *Why is God waiting so long?*

**What are you waiting for God to do in your life or in the life of someone you love?**

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**How has this waiting time been one of the “good parts”? How has God used this to get or hold your attention?**

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### **The Why behind the Wait**

I’ve divided Sarah’s story (Sarai at first), into six study weeks. In our first four lessons of each week, we’ll dig into the narrative and consider both Sarah’s and God’s perspectives on what unfolds. Then in the fifth lesson of each week, I’ll give you an opportunity to retell Sarah’s story (it’s so good to make these stories retrievable for later) and reflect on how God is inviting you, too, to be shaped by his promises.

One of the greatest tensions we'll encounter in Sarah's story is time. Time is slipping by, making it increasingly unlikely that God's promises will ever be fulfilled. And the unspoken question that grows like a crescendo is, *Why, God? Why the wait?*

promise made



I'll invite you to wrestle with this tension in your own story as you observe it in Sarah's.

Have you ever struggled with that long stretch between the parentheses? Have you longed for injustices to be made right? Have you agonized over the lack of evidence that he is working anything together for good (Romans 8:28)? I certainly have. A while back, I bought a five-year prayer journal that provides a page for each day of the year to record your prayers. In Year Two, you can look back at your prayer from the previous year on that day. Once, after recording a particularly agonizing request to God in the journal, I looked back on my prayer from that same day a few years before and realized my plea was almost identical. Word for word, I was crying out to God for exactly what I had already requested. Do you have any “on repeat” prayer requests you've been bringing to God, literally for years?

God often uses the open parentheses to hold our attention and turn our focus to him. My prayer journal is tangible evidence of the “cling in between” the parentheses of God's promises. God frequently lifts my eyes to him while I wait on him. Have you experienced this, too?

Certain purposes of God can *only* be accomplished between a set of widely placed parentheses. As you study, keep the following two purposes in mind, both of which are demonstrated in Sarah's story. Keep

them in mind for yourself, too, as you navigate the wide space between the promises made and the promises kept by God.

## 1. God's Faithfulness Is Proven over Time

Suppose I showed you a photo and said, "Here's a man I met today who is so faithful." You might think that was an odd thing to say. How could I possibly know if someone I just met is faithful? But what if I showed you the same photo and said, "Here's my husband of twenty-six years. He's so faithful." Now I have more credibility, right?

You see, **faithfulness is only demonstrated over time.**

As we study Sarah's life and the promises God made and kept to her, we're going to learn about God's faithfulness in a way we couldn't if our Bibles skipped straight from Genesis 3 to Matthew 1. In some instances, decades will elapse between the promises God makes and keeps. In other instances, we're still waiting (along with Sarah) for God to close the parentheses.

In every paragraph of Sarah's life, God is showing us that he is faithful. And in the pages that follow, we see that **God is willing to spend thousands of years on the Bible's timeline to demonstrate what a thinner Bible couldn't: His faithfulness.**

But God doesn't just want us to know *about* his faithfulness. He wants us to know him personally, as a faithful, covenant-keeping God. Think of my photo analogy. If my new "faithful" acquaintance promised to deposit \$1,000 into my checking account, I'd be a fool to give him my account number, right? But if my husband promised this, I'd probably start planning how to spend it.

**Our faithful God delights in our plans to "spend" what he has promised.** He wants his promises to make a personal difference in our lives, which brings us to our second anchoring truth.

## 2. God Wants Us to Be Shaped by His Promises

One of the things I'm excited for you to discover in Sarah's story is how her character shifts over time. You'll see her go from being a fretting, controlling, insecure, self-focused woman to a confident, secure woman of God who takes a great risk and is filled with laughter and joy. What makes the difference? This verse encapsulates it nicely:

[Sarah] considered him faithful who had promised.  
(Hebrews 11:11)

Do you see that word *consider*? It's an accounting term. Think of a banker *considering* your loan application and weighing the evidence to decide. So when Sarah examines God from various angles on the timeline, she considers him to be faithful, and this is what changes her. As Sarah watches God keep his promises, she comes to expect the pattern to continue.

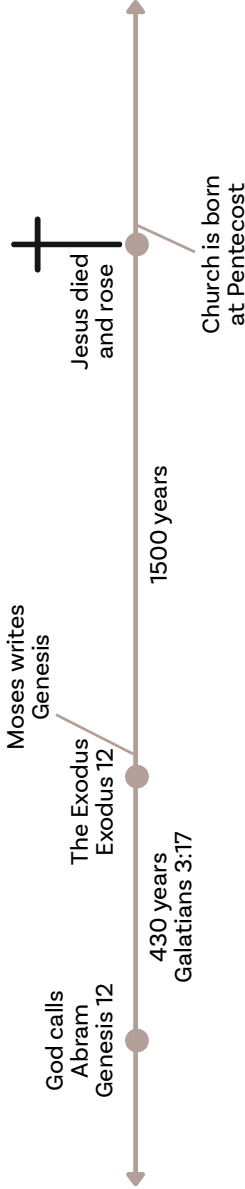
Sarah is shaped by the promises of God, which is what God wants for you as well. Sarah's story wasn't only meant for Sarah; it's one of the good parts of the story, meant for you and me. As you read and study, feel the hug of God's faithfulness as the parentheses close in Sarah's life, and watch for his faithfulness in your own life. God wants you to become a woman who—even in the waiting—can be described as Sarah was:

\_\_\_\_\_ considered him faithful who had promised.

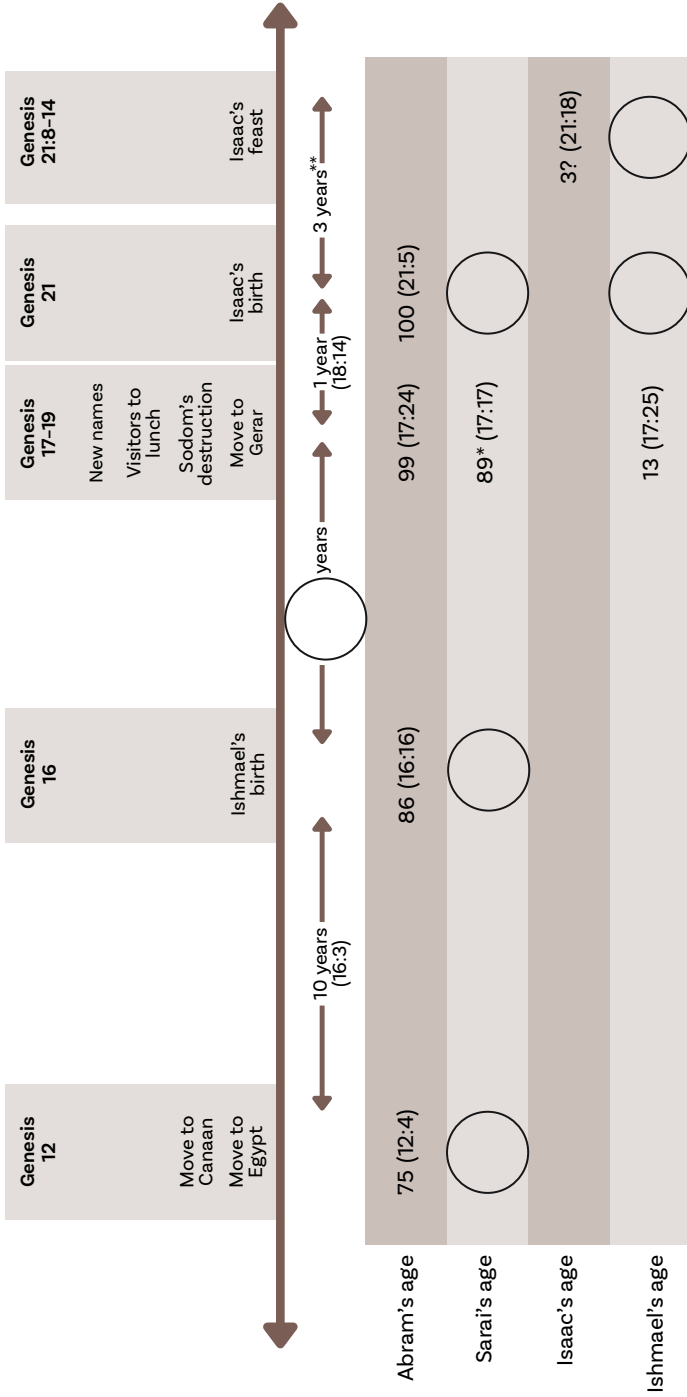
**Put your name in that blank and read it out loud. Do you want this to be true of you? Then open your Bible to one of the good parts in Genesis 12 and get ready to be shaped by God's promises.**

# Timelines and Maps

## Overarching Story



# Sarah's Timeline



\*Abram does the math in Genesis 17:17; nine month from now, they would be 90 and 100  
 \*\*Children were often weaned between ages 3 and 4

# Map of Ancient Mesopotamia and the Middle East



● = Ancient cities      ALL CAPS = Modern countries

# “She considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

Hebrews 11:11 NIV

Discover a God who is faithfully working even when you can't see it. In our high-stress, high-anxiety culture, there's much to relate to in Sarah's tumultuous world. God promised Sarah and Abraham a son, but when it wasn't happening in her ideal timing, doubt, worry, and fear for the future tempted Sarah to question God and take matters into her own hands.

Join Shannon Popkin in this six-week Bible study that dives deep into the life of Sarah. You'll spend five days a week reading powerful Scripture to reignite your faith in the one who is always in control even when it feels like nothing else is. Learn through Sarah's story to trust that God is all-knowing and all-powerful and that his plan and timing are perfect.

**SHANNON POPKIN** invites you to drink deeply of God's story and live like it's true. Her books include *Comparison Girl* and *Control Girl*, and she hosts the *Live Like It's True* Bible podcast. Shannon has been featured on *Revive Our Hearts*, *FamilyLife Today*, *The Gospel Coalition*, and *Proverbs 31*. Shannon shares life with Ken and their three young-adult kids in Wyoming, Michigan.

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