

07

SESSION SEVEN

God's Covenant With Abraham

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will learn that God is a covenant-making God, not a contract-keeping one. Because of sin, the people on earth had been separated from God and from one another, but God chose one man, one family, through whom He promised to reverse the separation of Eden (separation from God) and the separation of Babel (separation from one another). This promise was later fulfilled through Abraham's descendant—Jesus of Nazareth. And this promise continues to be fulfilled today through the mission of Jesus' church as peoples from all over the world become part of God's family through faith in the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; 17:1-14

THE POINT

God chooses a nation through which He will reverse the curse of sin and reclaim the world as His kingdom.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Trends show that people wait longer to get married and that fewer people get married today than in times past. But even though culture is changing, Americans are still fascinated with marriage. How else can you explain the popularity of shows like “The Bachelor”? The contestants are not just looking for a relationship, but for a person to marry. And viewers keep tuning in to see what happens.

People are captivated by the idea of marriage, and for good reason. Marriage is a covenant relationship where a man and a woman make promises that bind them to each other for the rest of their lives. A covenant is an arrangement where both parties agree to keep their commitments no matter what.

Unfortunately, many people now approach marriage not so much as a covenant but more as a contract. In a contract, if one party breaks their side of the deal, then the contract becomes null and void. “I’ll hold up my end of the bargain if you hold up your end.”

This new reality changes our view not just of marriage, but also of our relationship with God. Why? Because the Bible describes God’s relationship with His people as a covenant. Yet people often think of their relationship with God as a contract: “I have to do my part and be a good person, and if I do, then God will uphold His end of the deal by blessing me right now and taking me to heaven when I die. But if I do good and God doesn’t give me what I want, then I’m outta here!”

- **Consider your closest relationships. Are these relationships built on conditions? If so, how might that cause problems down the road?**
- **Have you or someone you know ever made a deal with God? What was it? How does that show a lack of trust in God’s promises?**

Option 2

Show photos of celebrities tightly zoomed in on different parts of their faces, such as their forehead, ear, or nose. Challenge students to identify each celebrity. After they have made several guesses, show them the rest of the celebrity’s face. Point out that it’s often difficult to identify someone without seeing the whole picture.

When we’re in the middle of a difficult situation, we can’t always see the bigger picture and how God is at work. However, we must trust that God sees everything and that He will keep His promises to us.

- **Have you ever felt confused, frustrated, or like God had abandoned you only to realize later that God had been faithfully working on your behalf all along?**
- **Is there a situation you’re facing today that just seems too big or impossible? How can you trust God’s knowledge of the bigger picture?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God chooses a nation through which He will reverse the curse of sin and reclaim the world as His kingdom.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Abraham:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to be the father of many nations

PLOT

As we saw in the previous session, Genesis 11 tells the story of the generations who came out of the flood and built the Tower of Babel with its top in the sky. The Lord came down to judge their pride, and He did so by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth.

The problem of sin and separation from God that began in the garden in Genesis 3 had not gotten better; in fact, it had only gotten worse. People were not only separated from God, but they were now separated from one another.

What can be done to remove these barriers that come between our relationships with both God and one another? How will God fix this problem? Watch and see how God initiated a renewed relationship with His people and continues His rescue plan.

GOD INITIATES A RENEWED RELATIONSHIP

As we start with this story, we see from the very beginning that God has not given up on humanity. He still has a rescue plan in place, and that plan involves entering into a unique relationship with Abraham (though he was called Abram before God changed his name).

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Gen. 12:1-4)

- Lead students through this passage of Scripture on page 48 in the PSG and instruct them to circle the uses of the pronoun “I” as it appears in God’s words to Abram.
- What do you think this tells us about God’s commitment to His glory and His plan of redemption?

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Election

Election is the gracious purpose of God according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

Through Abram’s descendants, God will reverse the misfortunes of Eden (separation from God) and Babel (separation from one another). The specific promises that God made to Abram make this connection with the events of Babel clear: The people of Babel wanted to “make a name” for themselves (Gen. 11:4), but God promised to make Abram’s name great (12:2). The rebels at Babel were scattered over the earth under God’s judgment, but God promised to and through Abram to bless “all the families of the earth” (12:3).

TIMELINE

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham’s faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM’S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham’s descendants.

God will reverse this tragedy by means of a covenant relationship with Abram in which He made three promises to him. God promised Abram land, offspring, and blessing:

Promised Land

First, God promised Abram land, and in connection with that, He commanded Abram to leave his land and travel to another land. This text ends with Abram obeying God's command and leaving Haran for Canaan—the promised land. Abram's obedience was an expression of his faith in God's promise.

Promised Offspring

Second, God promised offspring when He said that He would make Abram into a great nation. This continued the promise of Genesis 3:15. At several key points, God refers to Abram's "seed" (15:5; 17:8), and this promise becomes the primary focus of the stories about Abram in Genesis because of his wife Sarai's difficulty having children.

Promised Blessing

Finally, God promised to bless all the peoples on earth through Abram and his offspring. These verses are key because they set the stage for the rest of history. God's plan is to seek out and save all the peoples of the earth, not just a few. He

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Remember that Adam and later Noah are commanded to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.' The same words are repeated when the Lord appears to Abram and other patriarchs, but instead of being a command ('be fruitful'), it is a promise ('I will make you fruitful'). Adam is told to build himself a large household, but the Lord promises Abram, the head of a new human race, that He will build a house for him (Genesis 17:2,7).¹

wants to be the covenant Lord of a people made up of all nations on earth. From Abram would come the Israelites, who were called to be a light to the nations, drawing them to worship the one true, living God.

GOD COMMANDS ABRAM TO TRUST HIS PROMISES

Sometimes evidence seems to stack up against promises. God made wonderful promises to Abram, but Abram and Sarai still didn't have any children. Both of them were old, and Sarai was well past the years of being able to conceive. So Abram began to question God's promise, and even took matters into his own hands.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And

Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” (Gen. 15:1-3)

Abram experienced great doubt despite God’s great promises. He looked at his situation, and he thought that he would try to help God along by pointing out his servant Eliezer. If we’re honest, we’ll admit this kind of doubt is understandable. There are times in our lives when the promises of God do not look so promising.

In the midst of Abram’s doubt, God came to him and restated His promises, even adding to them. And Abram believed!

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:4-6)

God reassured Abram that he would have children of his own. He would give him offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Not only did God restate this promise to Abram and his children repeatedly (see Gen. 22:17; 26:4; also 28:14), but He saw it through. In Deuteronomy 1:10, Moses said, “The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven,” and again in Deuteronomy 10:22, “Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.”

Paul’s argument in Galatians also helps us see how God will continue to fulfill His promise to make Abram’s offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Paul made clear in Romans and Galatians that being the offspring of Abraham was not about your DNA, but about faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:11-12; Gal. 3:7). Only those who share Abram’s faith are the sons of Abraham, and these will be an innumerable multitude in heaven from every people group on the planet (i.e., as numerous as the stars of the sky; see Rev. 7).

The Lord made this promise to Abram, and then the Lord bound Himself to keep these promises by means of a covenant ceremony between Himself and Abram (like a marriage ceremony). Genesis 15:7-21 gives this account. God commanded Abram to bring Him certain animals and to cut them in half (except for the birds, 15:10). Abram fell asleep, and the Lord told him about the future exodus from Egypt as well as the conquest of the Amorites in the promised land. Then the presence of the Lord, represented in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, passed between the animal corpses. This act was, in effect, God saying to Abram, “Let this happen to Me if these things do not come true. Let Me be cut in pieces if I don’t uphold My end of the covenant.” The Lord was willing to take the covenant curses upon Himself if the covenant were broken, and that is exactly what He ended up doing at the cross.

TIMELINE

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH’S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Read Genesis 17:1-14. Here we see how Abram's faith faltered somewhat as he and Sarai grew older and older and still did not have a child. God came to him again to reiterate the promises and His covenant commitment. This time He gave Abram a new name, and He gave him a sign of their covenant relationship—a sign that would set His people apart from the rest of the world. The Lord changed Abram's name to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude" (17:6). Not only that, but God also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "princess," because kings would come from Abraham's family. He would produce a royal line (leading, of course, to the King of kings—Jesus of Nazareth).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The story of the calling of Abraham points to Jesus in many ways. For instance, in Genesis 12:7 the Lord made a promise to Abraham's seed, or offspring. This can be understood as referring to all of his offspring collectively (see Gen. 13:16) or just one (see Gen. 3:15; 4:25 ["child"]). Indeed, it could be said that Abraham's collective offspring benefited through the singular promised offspring of Isaac.

In Galatians 3, Paul picked up on this peculiarity of the word "seed." Paul emphasized that God's promise was not to "seeds" but to one "seed," and ultimately the "seed" of Abraham is Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). Yet those who belong to Jesus are then collectively considered "Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise" (3:29).

Another connection is found in Genesis 15:6, where we saw Abraham believing the promise of God and God counting it to him as righteousness. In Galatians 3, the apostle Paul pointed to Abraham's faith as a model of saving faith. Paul argued that we are not justified (declared righteous before God) by trying to keep the rules (Gal. 3:11). Those who break God's law are cursed, and we're all law-breakers. But the good news is that Christ became that curse for us on the cross (3:13). Justification only comes through faith in Jesus, and just as with Abraham, God credits His righteousness to our account (3:6-7). Today, we too are called to trust the promises of God.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what areas of your life do you often struggle with trusting the promises of God (at home, at school, with your future, in relationships, etc.)?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **When have you taken matters into your own hands to ensure the outcome you want? How did that turn out?** *Answers to this question will vary. Perhaps give students an example from your own life to help begin the conversation.*
- **What sometimes causes us to assume our relationship with God is dependent on how well we keep His rules?** *One of the main reasons we sometimes assume this is because we often have a works-based mind-set when it comes to our relationship with God. Instead of a works-based mind-set, the Bible instructs us to think about our relationship with God as being grace-based, knowing that it is only because of His mercy and grace that we are able to freely enter into a relationship with Him through Christ.*
- **What kind of person will a rules-focused life cause us to become? Do you think that's what God wants? Why or why not?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The calling of Abraham teaches us a great deal about stepping out in faith while not knowing the exact details and plans that lie ahead. The situation with Abraham was no different—he too experienced the same comforts, friendships, and familiarity that we would face upon leaving the places we call home.

- **God's initiation of relationship with Abraham called for Abraham's obedience. Why do you think Abraham obeyed God by leaving his land?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What would it take for you to obey God if He called you to do something that makes no sense from the world's perspective?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HEART

Abraham's calling causes us to think about the reality that God is the one who pursues us, not the other way around, and it is because of His righteousness, and not our own, that we are able to stand rightly before Him.

- **How does knowing that God seeks after you encourage you to trust in Him?** *By seeking after us God demonstrates that He cares, and we tend to trust those who genuinely care for us.*
- **How should knowing that God is the one that makes us righteous before Him motivate us to pursue lives of holiness?** *Knowing that we don't have to work for our righteousness, but instead freely receive it from God, both frees and motivates us to lives of obedience in response to the grace God has shown us.*



HANDS

The calling of Abraham is primarily about God continuing His rescue plan of humanity. It isn't primarily about Abraham, or even his future descendants—it is about God and the fact that He will be rescuing peoples from every tribe, tongue, and nation as a result of His actions in the life of Abraham. If God has a global perspective, shouldn't we as well?

- **What are some ways your student group can be involved right now in being a light to the nations?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include individual things like personal prayer and evangelism, as well as group participation in mission trips, Christian sponsored clubs on school campus, etc.*
- **How does the way we live affect our mission as God's people? How does it bring glory to Him?** *Answers to this question will vary, but centers around the idea that our witness to others includes the way we live around them, for better or for poorer. When we live in such a way that makes much of Jesus and others see that, then God is glorified.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #7 can be used during group time; this contains a quote by Tim Keller related to the study.

SOURCES

1. Paul J. Leithart, *A House for My Name* (Canon Press, 2000), 61.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject