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God's Covenant with Abram

Key Themes

- God provides salvation from sin through Jesus—the seed of Abraham.
- God is faithful to His promises.

Key Passages

- Genesis 15:1–21, 17:1–27; Galatians 3:15–18

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the nature of the covenant between God and Abraham.
- Connect the descendants of Abraham to the hope of the gospel.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, "How is Jesus connected to Abraham?"

Have students use bookmarks to mark Genesis 15:1, Genesis 17:1, and Galatians 3:15 in their Bibles.



Studying God's Word

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God made a covenant with Abram, which was ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ—a descendant of Abram through Isaac. Jesus Christ is the promised descendant through whom all nations have been blessed. He alone brings the hope of redemption to the world.

Study the Prepare to Share section.

Go Before the Throne.



Activity: Abraham's Seed

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Students will use New Testament references to the faith of Abraham to recognize that Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham who brings us a hope of salvation through faith apart from works.

Student Guides

Pencils



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

To prepare for this lesson, read the following passages: Genesis 15:1–21, 17:1–27; Galatians 3:15–18.

Before the beginning of time, God established a plan to redeem a people to Himself (Genesis 3:15). According to God's plan, this people would descend from His servant Abram. Abram would not only be the physical father of the Israelites (Genesis 12:2) but would also serve as the spiritual father of all who would come to faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 4:11). Throughout these chapters in Genesis, God's promise to Abram and his descendants—the Abrahamic Covenant—is given, confirmed, and amplified. The covenant begins in Genesis 12:1–3, where Abram is promised:

- God will make him a great nation (Genesis 12:2).
- God will bless him (Genesis 12:2).
- He will be a blessing (Genesis 12:2).
- God will bless those who bless Abram (Genesis 12:3).
- God will curse those who curse Abram (Genesis 12:3).
- Through Abram all nations will be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

But Abram was childless. How would this promise ever come to pass? His question was finally voiced in Genesis 15:2: "Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless?" God's response? "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars . . . So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5).

God was faithful to His promises as He continued to shape Abram's life to His purposes. Chapter 17

revealed God again confirming this covenant made between God and Abram and his descendants (Genesis 17:7). The sign of the covenant was to be circumcision (Genesis 17:10). And it is here that God changes his name—from Abram, meaning *exalted father*, to Abraham, meaning *father of a multitude* (Genesis 17:5). Even in this name change, we see God reassuring Abraham of His faithfulness.

Throughout this amazing saga and in spite of apparently impossible circumstances, we know that Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). In fact, we see these words repeated throughout the New Testament (Romans 4:3, 4:22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23) as a reminder that it is not our works of righteousness but faith in God—belief in what He says and trust in Christ—that leads to righteousness.

APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

More and more we are confronted by a culture that refuses to believe that the Bible is God's inerrant Word. Though these people rarely read or study the Word of God themselves, we are often able to present them with historical information and recent findings.

For example, as God described the land Abraham was soon to overcome and inhabit, He mentioned the Hittite people (Genesis 15:19–21). Many skeptics have discounted the accuracy of the Bible and the history of the Old Testament because of the lack of extra-biblical historical information about the Hittites. Archaeologists in 1832 confirmed God's Word when they discovered a city that proved to be the capital of the Hittite empire, Hattusa, at modern-day

Boghazköy in Turkey. Now the Hittites are accepted as a once-great civilization, and God has silenced those who would doubt Him in this matter.

At one time skeptics even questioned God's Word because of His statement to Abraham that his descendants would outnumber the stars of the heaven and be as numerous as the sands of the sea (Genesis 22:17). It was thought that no more than 10,000 stars existed. They did not appear to be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and certainly not more than we could count. But with the invention of powerful telescopes, today we can actually estimate the number of stars, and we know that in our galaxy alone there are more than 100 billion stars.

With the reliability of the Bible increasingly under attack, it's encouraging to observe God using science and archaeology, not as enemies of His truth, but as confirmation that His Word—every word—proves true (Proverbs 30:5–6).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It was much more dramatic than a simple handshake. It was a sacred sign that a covenant had been made. It seems strange that God would request a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon after Abram questioned Him about the land he was to inherit (Genesis 15:7–9).

But this was the requirement of some ancient covenants. A promise between two individuals sometimes involved cutting animals in half and placing them on either side of a pathway. The pledging parties would walk between the freshly killed animals as a sign of the curse they were willing to accept—if

they reneged on their agreement, may they too be cut limb from limb just as these animals had been (see Jeremiah 34:18–20).

The covenant with Abram was not a typical ancient covenant; it included the God of Israel. God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep, and after dark, a smoking oven and a burning torch passed between the animal pieces (Genesis 15:17). While Abram slept, God Himself, represented by the oven and the torch, bound Himself solemnly to His promise. God alone made the commitment because God alone could fulfill it. His promises to Abram would indeed be kept.

For more information on this topic, see the Online Resource Page.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Dear Lord, you have shown me what faith in you looks like through your servant Abraham. Abraham never saw the fulfillment of your promise through Jesus Christ—yet he believed and obeyed. I pray, Lord, that you will enable me to learn how to trust you more and rely on your promises—even through distressing trials. Thank you for your amazing plan of redemption that began in Genesis and made its way through history for 4,000 years until the birth of Jesus Christ—my Savior. May my students come to see the hope and the future in that plan and submit themselves in faith and obedience to your Word and to Jesus Christ.

► **Pace your lesson!** You can use the provided clocks to indicate the time each section should be completed to keep the lesson on schedule. While teaching, you can compare your anticipated times with the actual time and shorten or drop sections as necessary.





Review

Last week we looked at how Abram (later renamed Abraham) was called out of Ur to a land that God would show him.

Where did Abraham eventually settle? *He really didn't settle anywhere, but he wandered in the land of Canaan.*

After arriving in Canaan, Abraham travelled into Egypt (Genesis 12:10–13:1) and then back to Canaan, stopping again at Bethel. In all of this, Abraham trusted God and demonstrated his faith through his obedience to God's commands.

Where in the New Testament do we find Abraham's faith commended as an example? *Hebrews 11 talks of the faith of Abraham as an example for us.*

Another of the main ideas that we discussed was the timing of the rewards that Abraham received. For the remainder of his life, Abraham had no permanent place to live in Canaan, but moved about in

tents. He absolutely trusted God's promise to make him a great nation, but Abraham never saw those promises fulfilled while he was alive. He did receive the son who would continue the line that would eventually become the nation of Israel, but we will discuss that more in the next two lessons.

Ultimately, Abraham was looking forward to the hope of heaven (Colossians 3) and trusting that God was able to fulfill that promise. Contrary to the popular teaching we might see from television preachers, our faith in Christ is not a way to get healthy and wealthy. In fact, believers are promised trials and persecution as they follow Christ, but their inheritance of heaven is secure. Knowing that Christ has secured our righteousness, we can rest from working to receive the promise of heaven and look forward to that reward.



► Write on the board, "How is Jesus connected to Abraham?"

► Have students use bookmarks to mark Genesis 15:1, Genesis 17:1, and Galatians 3:15 in their Bibles.

Genesis 15:1–21



Studying God's Word

READ THE WORD

As we continue looking at Abraham and his life, we are going to examine the covenant that God made with him. Thinking back to last week, God had promised to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him, and to bless others through Abraham.

Let's read Genesis 15:1–21 together. Divide the passage (1–7, 8–16, 17–21) and have several people read the passage aloud.

EXAMINE THE WORD

We certainly don't have time to examine the entire passage, so our questions will focus on the nature of the covenant that God made with Abraham.

Observe the Text

Refer to the Bible Study poster to remind your students how to dig deeper into God's Word by asking the right questions.

- ? What type of literature is this passage? *Historical narrative.*
- ? How did Abraham hear from God? *In a vision.*
- ? What did the Lord call Himself? There are two answers in Genesis 15:1. *His shield. His great reward.*
- ? In Genesis 15:2–3 Abraham was questioning the Lord. He seemed to be concerned about something. What was it? *Abraham reminded God that he did not have an heir of his own.*
- ? God identified Abraham's heir as coming from where? *From Abraham's own body.*

When the Lord said it would be "one who will come from your own body," that meant it would be a child of Abraham's, not a servant or another relative. He was confirming to Abraham that he would still have a child.

- ? In verse 5, God told Abraham to look toward heaven. What did he tell Abraham to do? *Count the stars.*
- ? How many descendants would Abraham have? *As many as the stars.*
When God told Abraham to count the stars—if he could—he was telling Abraham that his descendants would be numerous just like the stars. Did you know that there are more than 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone? God was saying to Abraham that his descendants would be too numerous to count.
- ? Where did Abraham's righteousness come from according to verse 6? *God credited him with righteousness because he believed God.*
- ? When Abraham looked for a sign, what did God instruct him to do? *Abraham was to bring five animals.*
- ? What did Abraham do with the animals? *Abraham cut the heifer, goat, and ram in half and kept the birds whole, and the animals were placed in a row with the halves opposite each other.*
- ? Once it was dark, what happened? *A burning oven and a burning torch passed between the halves of the animals as Abraham was in a deep sleep.*
- ? How long would it be before Abraham's descendants possessed the land? *They would be strangers in a land for 400 years before possessing the land.*
- ? What were the boundaries of the land they would possess? *From the river of Egypt (not the Nile) to the Euphrates.*

- What figures, symbols, or practices do we need to understand or interpret from this passage? *Understanding the dividing of the animals and what the oven and torch represent will be important in understanding the passage.*

Discover the Truth

Now that we have asked questions about the text, let's talk about the main idea and try to understand this ceremony that might seem to be a bit odd to our ears.

As Abraham responded to God, he reminded God, as if that were necessary, that he had no children to carry on his name and become the great nation that God had promised. God, again, used the idea that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and that his heir would come from his own body, not his servant's.

Let's examine this act of cutting the animals in half. Abraham had asked for a sign—he was looking for a contract with God. When we sign a contract today, the two parties each present their names in ink in the presence of witnesses. In simpler times, a handshake was sufficient for securing a loan. Other cultures exchanged items or mingled their blood together.

In Abraham's culture, they would cut these animals in half and make a passageway. The two parties would walk through to signify that if they did not keep the conditions of the covenant that they deserved to be just like the animals. God was making a contract with Abraham and, while Abraham was asleep, God passed through the middle of the animals in the form of a burning oven and a torch.

- Was this contract based on the performance of Abraham? Did he have to keep his end of the bargain? *No. God was making a unilateral covenant with Abraham. Abraham had nothing to do but to place his faith in God's promise. This is evident in the fact that Abraham did not pass between the animals, but God did so alone.*
- This idea reminds us of the independence of God—He does not need mankind, but chooses to use humans to fulfill His plans. *Refer to Independent on the Attributes of God poster.*

There was nothing special about Abraham that caused God to choose him apart from what God had done for or given to Abraham.

- Another important point of this passage is a section of foreshadowing the future of the descendants of Abraham. What is foreshadowed in verses 12–16? *The bondage of the Israelites in Egypt for 400 years before they took possession of the land of Canaan is foreshadowed. This will be examined in a lesson in Quarter 4.*



INDEPENDENT

(Refer to Attributes poster.)

READ THE WORD

We are going to jump to chapter 17 for our next topic, but let me give you a quick summary of what happens in chapter 16 and the first half of 17.

Abraham was 86 years old, and Sarah doubted that she would ever have a child at her advanced age. Sarah convinced Abraham to take her Egyptian maid, Hagar, and she had a son by Abraham. He was named Ishmael and this situation became a source of great tension within the household—especially between Sarah and Hagar.

Chapter 17 jumps forward 13 years to when Abraham was 99 years old. God spoke to Abraham and affirmed His promise of an heir for Abraham and the land of Canaan. As we mentioned last week, this is the point where God changed his name from Abram to Abraham as a sign of the covenant (17:5). God commanded Abraham to mark this covenant with a physical sign—the circumcision of all of the males of his household and his descendants. This would be a physical reminder of the covenant.

Let's read Genesis 17:15–27 together and see how God continued to reveal his plans to Abraham. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

Genesis 17:15–27

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? What type of literature is this passage? *Historical narrative.*
- ? Who are the characters in this passage? *God, Abraham, Sarah, and Ishmael.*
- ? How old was Abram? It is in Genesis 17:1. *Ninety-nine years old.*
- ? Look at Genesis 17:5. What did God do? *God changed Abram's name to Abraham.*

► Take time to understand the timing of the events since large amounts of time often pass between chapters in the books of history.

God once again promised Abram many descendants. And God changed Abram's name to Abraham! Abram means "father"—and Abraham means "father of a multitude, or many." God was telling Abraham that he would be a father of many, in spite of the fact he was an old man—99 years old—and he had no son!

- ? What promise was given to Sarah as God changed her name? *God promised to give her a child and to make her the mother of nations.*
- ? How did Abraham respond to God's words? *He laughed and questioned, in his mind, whether a 100-year-old man and 90-year-old woman could bear a child.*
- ? What did Abraham propose to God? *That Ishmael might be the heir.*
- ? What was God's response? *He confirmed that Sarah would have a child.*

- ? What was the name of the child? Isaac.
- ? When would Isaac be born? One year from this time.
- ? What promise did God give to Ishmael? He would have 12 sons and they would be princes. Compare to Genesis 25:13–18 if time allows.
- ? How was Isaac connected to the covenant? God made it clear that the descendants of the covenant were to come through Isaac and not Ishmael.
- ? How did Abraham demonstrate his faith in God's promise? He was circumcised along with all of the males of his household.
- ? Has God's promise changed since it was first revealed to Abraham? No, but it has become more specific.

IMMUTABLE FAITHFUL

(Refer to Attributes poster.)

Discover the Truth

God has been steadfast in keeping His promise to this point, and looking back 4,000 years to Abraham's time, we see that God is immutable—He never changes. This should give us great hope knowing that the God who fulfilled these promises to Abraham will do the same for us. We read throughout Scripture that God is unchanging, and we see that truth in the account of Abraham and the fulfillment of the covenant. God is always faithful to His promises—He cannot lie or deny His own nature. Refer to these attributes on the Attributes of God poster.

Abraham had been waiting 13 years since the last promise was spoken to him by God, but now he was told that within a year he would have the son of promise—Isaac.

Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning "princess," as a sign of her role as the mother of the descendants of the nation of Israel. At 90, she was to become the mother of a child. This child was to be the son of the promises that God had made to Abraham.

God had made a covenant with Abraham and had placed no conditions on Abraham—God was going to keep His end regardless of Abraham's fleeting doubts of a child being born to aged parents. God had purposed before He created the universe that He would provide salvation for the fallen human race through Abraham's seed. We are going to do an activity to help us connect what we are reading in these Old Testament passages to the New Testament's expanded revelation of that plan.





Abraham's Seed

MATERIALS

- Student Guides
- Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

Throughout the Old Testament, we see glimpses of the Messiah that we know as Jesus. In Genesis 3, we saw the promise of the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. Here in the account of Abraham, we see another promise of descendants that God will use to bless all nations.

Using this worksheet, we are going to use a few New Testament passages to help us more fully understand the promises that were given to Abraham and how they extend to us today. In small groups, work through these questions and we will discuss them in a few minutes.

Have the students break into small groups and complete the worksheet.

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

- ?
As you read the two passages from Romans and Galatians, the faith of Abraham is described and connected to Jesus. What did these passages say about the connection between faith, works, and righteousness? *Works, even by keeping the law, cannot earn righteousness; it is only through faith in God and His promises that we can be considered righteous.*
- ?
That is one thread through both of those passages, but there is another thread that draws the work of Christ into the picture.

How is it that Abraham, all of us, and people from all nations find a blessing in the work of Christ? *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of working for righteousness (Galatians 3:13) by His perfect life, and that righteousness is credited to us by faith in Christ (Romans 4:23–5:2).*

That is the basis for the glorious doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, and it gives us great reason to praise God for His kindness to us through Christ.

The gospel, the good news of salvation, was preached to Abraham when he was told that all nations would be blessed through him. This is very clear from Galatians 3:8. Abraham was saved from his sins in the same way that we are—through Christ. He was looking forward to a coming Messiah. We look back on what the Messiah has already done. Abraham's seed was Christ and it is in Christ that the nations are blessed.

In either case, we are justified by faith in the promises of God. Not only do we know that our sins can be forgiven because Christ bore those sins on the Cross, but we can be seen as righteous before God because of the perfect life He lived here on this earth. We don't get a slate that is merely wiped clean, but a clean slate that has the merits of Christ written on it. God sees His Son's righteousness when He looks at those who have trusted in Christ for forgiveness. This is called the imputed righteousness of Christ—His goodness is credited to our account when we receive His work on the Cross by faith.





Applying God's Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

I hope that you can see how God has coordinated His plan to bring salvation to all nations. Rather than providing a plan that depended on Abraham keeping his half of the contract, God was pleased to guarantee the completion of His promise to Abraham based solely on what God would do through Abraham. Specifically, God sent Jesus through the descendants of Isaac to bless all nations with the hope of the gospel.

Salvation comes by God's grace through faith, not by works of righteousness that we have done (Titus 3:4–7). Just like Abraham, when we turn to God in faith we can look forward to eternity in the city whose maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). God is faithful and will fulfill the promises He has made to His children. Abraham is a great example of that sure hope and the faithfulness of God.

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

I hope your heart is rejoicing in knowing how much God has done for us through Abraham and, ultimately, through Christ. Let's think about how we can take what we have learned today and apply it to our lives as we seek to be more like Christ.

- ?
What truth from the Scriptures we looked at today has helped you see God's grace in the account of Abraham? *Accept various answers, but try to draw attention to how God showed Abraham kindness apart from any goodness in Abraham—it was God's free gift to him.*
- ?
How has your view of earning righteousness changed in light of the passages we have looked at today? *Many people mistakenly believe that people before*

Christ had to earn their righteousness, but it is clear from Abraham's account that righteousness comes only through faith in Christ.

- ? How does knowing that God is unchanging and absolutely faithful give you peace and assurance of your salvation? If God is faithful to His promises to forgive us of our sins, then we have no fear that will ever change. The immutability of God offers us great security and assurance.
- ? As you share the gospel with others, you will likely encounter people who claim that they are good people and that God will accept them based on all the good things they have done. How could you use Abraham to help them understand the error of their thinking? It was Abraham's faith in the promises of God that is what his righteousness was based on—not his good works. If Christ is responsible for our righteousness and it has nothing to do with our good deeds, we must help people to recognize the error of trusting in their own goodness. We must look to Christ alone. It is only in Him that our sins can be removed from our account and His righteousness credited to us.



MEMORY VERSE

Acts 17:26–27 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Praise God for His unchanging character and His faithfulness to fulfill His promises.
- Ask God to make the truth of His Word clear to each student.
- Ask God for wisdom and boldness to proclaim the good news of the gospel of Christ.

Notes