



God's Covenant with Abram

Lesson Focus

God made a covenant with Abram, promising to give him a son and descendants as numerous as the stars. Rather than waiting for God's timing, Abram and Sarai took matters into their own hands, and the result was the birth of Ishmael through Sarai's servant Hagar.

Key Passages

Genesis 15:1–21, 16:1–16

What You Will Learn

- The nature of the covenant between God and Abraham.
- How the descendants of Abraham connect to the hope of the gospel.

Memory Verse

Genesis 12:1–2 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.”

Prepare to Learn

Scriptural Background

Before the beginning of time, God established a plan to redeem a people for 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). 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 dishonor 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: "O Lord GOD,

what will you give me, for I continue childless?" God's response? "Look toward heaven, and number the stars . . . So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5).

God was faithful to His promises as He continued to shape Abram's life for His purposes. Chapter 17 reveals 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 the LORD, and he accounted it to him as 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 obedience but faith in God—the belief in what He says—that leads to righteousness.

Historical/Apologetics Background

At the time of Abram, a covenant was much more dramatic than a simple handshake. It was a

sacred sign. 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 fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the animal pieces (Genesis 15:17). While Abram slept, God Himself, represented by the pot and the torch, bound Himself solemnly to His promise. God alone made the commitment because God alone could fulfill it. His promises to Abraham would indeed be kept.

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. However, 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). For many years, skeptics had 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. However, 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 Bogazkale 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 questioned God's Word because of His statement to Abraham that his descendants would outnumber the stars of heaven and be as numerous as the sands on the seashore (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 over 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).

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

Studying God's Word

What happens when you take matters into your own hands?

Take notes as you study the following passages.

Genesis 15:1–21

Genesis 16:1–16

Abram's Error

As we consider Abram's actions, no doubt his intent was to bring about the promise God had given him. He wasn't violating a direct command from God (as far as we know from the text), and it probably seemed to him that he was acting in a way that would bring about God's promise. So where did he go wrong? Answer the following questions to see if you can understand this idea better.

1. What action had Abram previously taken that demonstrated his lack of trust in God's promise of an heir? (Take a look at Genesis 12:10–13 if you need to.)

2. What part of God's created order did Abram violate in trying to bring an heir into the world through Hagar?
3. Abram allowed Sarai to do whatever she wanted after Hagar conceived. What consequence might have happened had God not intervened and told Hagar to return?
4. How would you explain how Abram went wrong in not waiting for God's timing?

God's Word in the Real World

1. What truth from the Scriptures we looked at today has helped you see God's grace in the account of Abram?
2. How does knowing that God is unchanging and absolutely faithful give you peace and assurance of your salvation (if you have trusted in Christ's work)?
3. What does it mean to "wait on God" and His timing? Why is this so challenging at a practical level?

4. In what areas of your life do you find it hard to wait on God's timing?
5. How do we maintain hope in the midst of circumstances where God seems to have forgotten us?

Prayer Requests
