

God's Covenant With Abram

Genesis 15-16

BSF Lesson 10

Notes

Genesis

Focus Verse

“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” – Genesis 15:6

- God's Promise and Abram's Covenant – Genesis 15
- Abram and Sarai's Sin and Hagar's Flight – Genesis 16

Engage

God's Word is filled with His promises. The promises in God's Word stand on the integrity of God's character. God's promises set the direction for living boldly in faith. But what happens when God has not yet delivered what He promised? What if believing God means trusting Him when His answer is different than the answer you want? Believing God, you earnestly pray for a spouse, a parent, a job, return of a straying child, relief from pain, or the salvation of someone you love. And you wait. And you pray. And you wait. **Can God be trusted when what He has promised seems impossible or His path not the one you would choose?**

God assured Abram he would be the father of a great nation. Yet Abram and Sarai were advancing in years, Sarai was barren and the clock was ticking. Real struggles face everyone who believes in God. God's timing seldom matches our timeline. God does not fulfill His plan for us the way we anticipate or prefer. We cannot see the future, and doubts arise. Human solutions may appear more convincing than God's promises. In times of doubt, circling back to the truth provides perspective. In these chapters, God repeats His promise to Abram a third time. God met Abram's doubts with reassurance. **Faith requires constant dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit to do what is impossible apart from God's power.** Will you ask God for faith, patience and wisdom to trust His provisions, methods and timing?

God's Promise and Abram's Covenant – Genesis 15

Comfort: Abram's God – 15:1

Abram stood at a crossroads, a critical point in his faith journey. He had fought a war and won. He knew God's presence and power but had not yet held that promised child. Verse 1 signals a new period in Abram's life: “After this.” Most of us quantify our lives by defining moments – events we explain by “before this” or “after this.” At a pivotal point in Abram's story “the word of the LORD came.” This often-repeated Old Testament phrase appears for the first time here, communicating divine authority and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹ God spoke truth to Abram in a vision. **God met Abram's needs, not with a timeline or dates on a calendar, but with a reminder of two important aspects of His character.**

“I am your shield.”

Abram defeated a powerful alliance of kings to rescue Lot. What if the enemy retaliated? Scripture often

reminds us to put off fear. **Our human tendency is to be afraid; believing truth about God overcomes human fear.** God said to Abram and says to us: Do not be afraid; I will protect you ... I am your security. You may be called to pass through fire or water, but I will shield you from all real harm.² The concept of God as our shield by faith continues throughout Scripture.³ Jesus Himself offers the ultimate promise that alleviates our fear: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.”⁴

I am “your very great reward.”

Abram had just refused great financial reward from the king of Sodom. Now, God revealed that Abram had chosen the very best reward. **God's presence and pleasure gave deeper joy and satisfaction than any earthly possession.** Paul said that to know Christ made everything he once valued seem like rubbish (Philippians 3:8). And Psalm 37:4 says, “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Knowing God is a “very great” reward.

Clarification: Abram's Son – 15:2-5

In verse 2, Abram asked a very honest question that revealed his doubt and discouragement. Ten years had passed since God promised a son, but Abram and Sarai were still childless. He had God's promises, but it seemed too late to hope for an heir other than his servant Eliezer. Abram knew the fulfillment of God's promises depended on his offspring. **Abram's impatience was an understandable human response.** How could God now fulfill His promise? Had Abram misunderstood God?

God designed human minds with good reasoning skills, a reflection of His image. **Abram's impatience increasingly drew him to human reasoning and common cultural solutions.** He began interpreting God's promise through his current, less-than-promising circumstances. Because God had not given Abram and Sarai children, he determined his servant Eliezer should become his heir, a common cultural practice for a childless man.

God clarified Abram's confusion. Once again, "the word of the LORD came to him." Abram's heir would not be Eliezer but his own son, yet to be born. God's Word clarifies the confusion believers face in this world. In a moment of doubt, a Bible passage comes to our minds; we discover an answer through study; we hear truth from a pastor or friend. **God's truth provides perspective and hope when we are confused and discouraged.** Tangible answers may not come immediately, but God can be trusted when we are confused and down.

Consider the tender way God moved Abram from doubt to belief. God revealed the incomprehensible truth, "a son who is your own flesh and blood" would become a nation as numerous as the stars. God "took him outside" to look at the night sky filled with too many stars to count, a reminder that Abram could view every night. God spoke to Abram in a uniquely personal way to capture his heart. **God's clarifying promise of a physical son encouraged Abram to believe God could do the impossible, even give life to a body that was as good as dead.**⁵

Confirmation: Abram's Faith – 15:6

Genesis 15:6 captures a monumental statement: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." What does that mean? By His grace, God transferred His perfect righteousness onto Abram as he believed God would fulfill this promise. The best of human effort is flawed, unable to meet God's holy standards. Only God's righteousness can satisfy God's holy standards. **By grace through faith, God credits believers with righteousness they cannot produce on their own.** This is the heart of the gospel message that gives hope to sinful people.

Abram could not understand everything God's promise meant, but he was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."⁶ **Abram took God at His Word and acted accordingly.** Abram believed what God said and lived fully persuaded that what God had promised, He would deliver.

In Galatians, Paul explained the full impact of Abram's faith, "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."⁷ **All of God's blessings, to Abram and all people, hang on this promise.** For all eternity, believers will marvel at this glorious truth.

Covenant: God's Promise Sealed – 15:7-21

God moved the conversation from His promise of a son to His promise of the land, and Abram asked for confirmation. God understood what Abram needed to confirm his faith. **God gave him a binding covenant that included a ceremony, a prophecy and a sign.**

The ceremony

God transacted a formal contract, or covenant, with Abram. The technical term in Hebrew is "to cut" a covenant. In ancient times, people usually confirmed business transactions and national treaties with solemn ceremonies. The parties brought animals to slaughter and cut them into halves. The animal halves lay opposite each other with a path in the center. The contracting parties walked the path together as they repeated the covenant terms to represent their unity of mind. The shed blood of the animal sacrifices demonstrated their depth of commitment and the consequences they wished upon themselves if they broke the covenant.

Abram proved his faith in a practical way when he prepared the sacrificial animals. He waited for God all day, protecting the slaughtered animals from birds of prey. God's response came, but perhaps not in the way Abram expected. At sunset, God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep as He delivered a dramatic prophecy about Abram's descendants.

The prophecy

Observe how God repeated every key point in this prophecy to Abram. He told Abram his descendants would live as slaves in a foreign land for 400 years but come out with great possessions. Repetition confirms and reinforces the promise and aids memory.

God promised to deal justly with the Amorites and Canaanites who owned the land in Abram's day. Though their sin was great, God would not remove them from Canaan until their sin "reached its full measure." **God gave the Amorites full opportunity to repent and turn to Him.** He waited 400 years.

The sign

Normally, the contracting parties walked together between the animal halves to confirm the covenant. In this case, while Abram slept, God acted alone. God's presence was symbolized by the smoking firepot and blazing torch, which passed through the animal pieces. **God swore by Himself to fulfill the covenant.** God's covenant with Abram was unconditional, not dependent on human contribution. God and God alone would keep every promise for the honor of His own Name.

The writer of Hebrews calls for reverent gratitude to God, who "is a consuming fire."⁸ **Fire frequently**

symbolizes God throughout Scripture. The signs of the smoking firepot and blazing torch recall the flaming sword of the angels guarding the tree of life in Eden. God's fiery guard that prevented access to the tree of life⁹ now guided the way to eternal life through faith.

The first readers of Moses' account in Genesis related well to these events. God's presence appeared to Moses in a burning bush. God led and protected these people of the Exodus with a pillar of fire by night. God came in fire to Mount Sinai when He gave His people His Law.¹⁰ Holy God lights the way for His people.

Abram and Sarai's Sin and Hagar's Flight – Genesis 16

Genesis 15 confirmed God's promise and Abram's faith. **Genesis 16 records another episode of Abram and Sarai's challenge to live by faith.** Although they believed God's promise, they struggled with waiting and misinterpreted God's promise. While God promised that Abram's son would come from his own body, they did not interpret that promise to include Sarai. God established marriage and the mandate of monogamy within marriage.¹¹ Sarai's offer of her slave Hagar to Abram was wrong. This culturally acceptable option violated Hagar, Abram, Sarai, their household and their marriage.

Abram's heir, despised Sarai. Sarai blamed Abram for her distress. This compromise with God's intended way produced bitterness and multiplied conflict within the family. Abram gave Sarai freedom to handle the situation, and she so mistreated Hagar that this young, pregnant woman ran away.

Abram and Sarai viewed Hagar as an object, a possession and pawn. They turned on each other and Hagar. Their choices landed outside God's intended way, but not outside God's intentional mercy. Though Abram and Sarai treated Hagar badly, **God saw Hagar as a person made in His image and showed her grace.**

A Human Solution to a Divine Delay – 16:1-5

Sarai's plan – 16:1-4a

According to the Code of Hammurabi (the code of law from the Babylonians around 1800 B.C.) and the Nuzi tablets (circa 1450-1350 B.C.), the purpose of marriage was mainly procreation. If the wife could not bear children, her husband expected her to provide a handmaid to have children for her. **God intended to fulfill His promise to Abram only through Sarai to prove His almighty power.** The miraculous birth of Isaac eventually fulfilled His promise.

Abram wrongly assumed Eliezer would be his heir before God clarified his understanding. Now he misinterpreted God's promise by assuming that because a child had not been born to Sarai, he should agree to her offer of Hagar. **Tragically, there is no mention that Abram and Sarai sought God in making this decision.** God allowed Abram and Sarai to carry out their plan and for Hagar to conceive a child. The son born to Hagar represents human self-effort outside of God's covenant of grace.¹²

Sarai's and Hagar's pain – 16:4b-6

This wrong decision immediately brought pain to the entire household. Hagar, realizing she carried

A Compassionate Response to a Despairing Runaway – 16:7-16

A personal encounter – 16:7

Imagine Hagar's emotions as she fled – rejected, abused, pregnant and alone in the desert. People had failed Hagar immeasurably, but God did not. **God so loved Hagar that He stepped into her desperate situation to give her help and hope.** Verse 7 tells us "the angel of the LORD found Hagar." God seeks us even when we are fleeing from Him. This verse represents the first mention of "the angel [not "an" angel] of the LORD."

- The angel of the Lord identified with **Yahweh**.
- He spoke and acted with God's **authority**.
- He accepted Hagar's **name** for Him.
- He received **worship**.
- The location is recorded in history as an **encounter** with God by its name Beer Lahai Roi.

For these reasons, many view "the angel of the LORD" as a visible pre-incarnate manifestation of God the Son.¹³

A probing question – 16:8

God called Hagar by name and asked her to share her plans and actions. The angel knew her identity – Hagar, slave of Sarai – and asked, “Where have you come from, and where are you going?” His questions were not intended to gain information, but to cut to the heart of the matter. Hagar admitted she was “running away from her mistress Sarai.”

A practical solution – 16:9

God gave Hagar two corrective instructions: return and submit. These commands were specific to Hagar and to God’s plans for her and Ishmael. This is not a binding command for all who are enslaved or mistreated to return to their abusers. Hagar risked her life and the life of her unborn child in the harsh conditions of the wilderness.

A promised future – 16:10-12

God offered hope to hurting Hagar. He promised safe delivery of a son, Ishmael, who would become a nation too numerous to count. Hagar was told, “The LORD has heard of your misery.” The name Ishmael means “God hears,” so all would know God heard Hagar’s cries of affliction. Ishmael would become the father of all Arabic nations. God foretold Ishmael’s

nature and the future of his descendants who would “live in hostility toward all his brothers,” which can be translated to mean “east of his brothers” (Isaac’s descendants).

A personal God – 16:13-16

Hagar encountered God, recognized His voice and demonstrated faith. For the first time, she not only knew about God but spoke to Him. The living God spoke personally into her desperate situation, cared for her needs and would be with her when she returned to her home and to Sarai. Therefore, she joyously spoke out her own name for her living, loving God, as she called Him “You are the God who sees me.” She even renamed the well where she rested, calling it Beer Lahai Roi – the well of “the One who sees me.”

The mounting costs of Abram and Sarai’s choices to act in haste instead of patiently waiting in faith are evident. It is assumed Pharaoh gave Hagar as a gift to Abram or Sarai when deceived about their marriage. The sin surrounding Ishmael’s conception reflects this pattern of acting in self-effort rather than faith. However, God keeps His promises despite our sin. He recognized the harm inflicted on Hagar as a powerless servant and offered her gracious blessings. **Faith requires constant dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit to do what is impossible apart from God’s power.**

The Doctrine of Justification

Genesis 15:6 is one of the most important verses in all Scripture, for by it we learn that all people in all ages are justified by grace through faith. Whether Old Testament or New, this statement holds true.

What is justification?

Justification is an instantaneous legal act whereby God, the just Judge, declares the believer righteous, upright and not guilty in His sight. Justification occurs by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. At the moment of belief, God considers our sins forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us. Justification by faith is God’s answer to the question: How does one become right with God?

How is justification possible?

Does God simply close His eyes to our disobedience and pretend to not see our sin? No. God’s holiness requires that He punish sin. So how is it possible for a believer, though he remains a sinner, to be declared righteous? Jesus paid sin’s penalty when He died on the cross and then was raised to life for our justification (Romans 4:25). **God declares a believer righteous, not based on the believer’s own personal works or righteousness, but on Christ’s sacrifice and righteousness.** Jesus is God’s provision for our sin.

Abram believed God’s promise, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Directly following Abram’s belief, he then took matters into his own hands regarding Hagar. But Abram’s righteous standing before God did not change. **Likewise, even when our faith is weak, the object of our faith, Jesus Christ the promised Messiah, remains forever strong.** Our standing before God cannot be shaken.

When I believe in justification by faith alone, I can know with assurance that I am loved and accepted by God. Nothing can change this fact. Not my sin. Not my failures. Not my mistakes. I can be free to confess my sin to God and others, knowing my relationship with God is not based on my performance. Peace, joy and gratitude may truly and sincerely mark my life.

However, when I do not believe in justification by faith alone, I will look to myself and my works as proof of my salvation. Peace and rest will elude me as I constantly worry about my status before God. I will view God as a harsh judge, eyeing my every thought, word and deed. But thanks be to God for freedom found through justification by faith alone!

Hold Fast

God Himself is a shield and reward to every believer who risks earthly security for His cause. More than 15 psalms praise God as the shield of His people. Stepping out to obey God or help others can bring opposition and risk. Pleasing God brings blessings that far surpass any earthly loss. Believers find their greatest reward living by faith in step with the Holy Spirit. Nothing this world offers compares to knowing God and walking with Him.

God promised Abram's descendants all the land from the Euphrates River in present-day Syria to the river of Egypt. When Moses wrote these words and delivered them to the first audience, they were poised to re-enter and possess this promised land. These returning Israelites became God's instrument to judge the wicked Amorite and Canaanite people. Israel re-established the full extent of these borders

prophesied to Abram during Solomon's reign and likely in the reign of Jeroboam II.¹⁴ Many Christians believe the nation of Israel will fully inhabit this land again at Jesus Christ's return. People from all nations share in the benefits of this promise to Abram's people.¹⁵

Abram did not fully understand God's full plan of redemption through His Son, but he believed what he knew. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."¹⁶ Before Jesus came, God credited Jesus' righteousness to those who believed God's promise and looked forward in hope. Today, God credits Jesus' righteousness to those who look back by faith to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In God's sight, Jesus Christ is "the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world."¹⁷ The Cross of Christ stands in the center of time.

Apply It

The only place to find true security is in God Himself. When Abram struggled, God did not offer him charts or graphs outlining his future. Instead, he turned Abram's gaze from the uncertainties of life to the certainty of Himself. God told Abram that He was his shield and very great reward. We look to so many people and places for the security, stability and fulfillment only God and His promises can provide. Have you experienced God as your shield this week? Do you value the "very great reward" that comes from following God? True joy comes when we set our gaze on God rather than our limited understanding and this world's passing pleasure.¹⁸ How will you deliberately set your gaze on God?

Faith trusts God's plan and timing, not human solutions. Abram and Sarai believed God's

promise, but they bypassed His wisdom and found a way that seemed right in the moment. Compromise with God's revealed plan may offer a quick fix but brings unintended suffering to ourselves and others. Doubts arise because we lack God's bigger, longer and wider perspective. We sin when we fail to believe God can or will accomplish what He has promised. What can you learn from Abram and Sarai?

What difficult situation in your life is causing you to doubt God or His plan? Where are you tempted to take action when God is asking you to wait on His timing? Will you honestly pour out your heart to God and wait on Him?

God sought Hagar, a desperate young woman abused and rejected by the people who should have protected and cared for her. God saw the injustice and

came near to the powerless. Her heart was deeply moved as she rightly proclaimed, "You are the God who sees me. ... I have now seen the One who sees me." Her exclamation captures one of the deepest longings of the human heart. We long to be known. We desire to be seen and understood. But our desire to be intimately known meets another perplexing human reality. We also fear being fully known. The fact that "God sees me" is equally comforting and alarming. There are things about us we prefer to hide. Do you find comfort knowing God understands you better than anyone else? True delight comes when we grasp that the God who sees it all loves us perfectly. Nothing He knows about you turns Him away. **The God who sees you also seeks you.** Will you run to Him?

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

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| 1: Inspiration from Holy Spirit: 1 Samuel 3:7; Jeremiah 1:2; Joel 1:1 | 10: God's fiery presence: Genesis 3:24; Exodus 3:1-6; 13:21-22; 19:18 |
| 2: Security in God: Isaiah 43:1-2 | 11: Monogamy: Genesis 2:24 |
| 3: Shield: Joshua 1:9; Psalms 18:30; 56:3; Isaiah 44:8; John 14:27; Ephesians 6:16 | 12: Ishmael: Genesis 17:19-21; 21:12; Galatians 4:23, 30 |
| 4: Overcomer: John 16:33 | 13: Angel of the Lord: Exodus 23:20-23; 32:34; Judges 13:21-22; Isaiah 63:9 |
| 5: Life from the dead: Romans 4:19-22 | 14: Promised land: 1 Kings 8:65; 2 Kings 14:25 |
| 6: Faith, blessings and God's promises: Romans 4:20-21 | 15: All nations blessed: Isaiah 2:1-4; 19:19-23 |
| 7: Blessed nations: Galatians 3:8-9 | 16: Abraham's joy: John 8:56 |
| 8: Consuming fire: Hebrews 12:29 | 17: Lamb: Revelation 13:8 |
| 9: Flaming sword: Genesis 3:24 | 18: Joy in the Lord: Psalm 16:5-6, 11 |