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**Lesson 4 Abrahamic Covenant**

Promises are a big deal to kids, even if no one actually uses the word promise. Parents have sometimes found themselves casually agreeing to do something, and being very strictly held to their promise, all the while muttering “I didn’t actually say ‘promise.’” Ever since childhood, there is within each of us the idea that a promise should not be broken. While that is true for people, it is certainly true for God. When God promises something we expect that he will certainly follow through!

God makes many promises in Scripture, often in the form of a covenant. Throughout our Bible God makes covenants with different people.[[1]](#footnote-1) This theme begins in Genesis 9 and continues throughout the whole Old Testament and into the New. In fact, the words “Old Testament” and “New Testament” come from two major covenants: the Old Covenant [testament] and the New Covenant [testament]. We won’t be able to look at every single covenant, but we will look at four of the major ones in the rest of this series.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Before we dive into this lesson, however, we need to define the word “covenant.” *A covenant is an agreement between two parties, in which one or both of them agree to do certain things for the others.* Some covenants are **conditional** – both parties have things they must do for the covenant to work. Others are **unconditional** – one party binds himself to do something for another. Probably the best way to think about this in modern terms is a “contract.” God “cuts a deal” with people throughout the Bible, and it is through these agreements that he begins and sets up his plan to rescue all of mankind.

***How can studying these promises made to people long ago help us in our faith today?***

***Why is seeing the big picture helpful as we study our Bibles?***

***What did we talk about last lesson?***

In our last lesson we saw that God promised Eve she would have a seed, a descendant, who would crush the serpent’s head. “Seed” can refer to an individual offspring or a group of offspring, and the seed of Eve is both a group (the people of God) and an individual (Jesus). What we will see in this and following lessons is how the idea of a descendant becomes very important for the book of Genesis, and how certain individual descendants become very important and take center stage. And the way God moves his plan forward with these offspring is by making covenants with them.

Many biblical commentators have noted that the structure of Genesis is broken up by 10 different “genealogies” or “generations” (Hebrew *toledoth*).[[3]](#footnote-3) Family lines matter to God, because there is a special lineage this book is following. We want to know who this promised Seed is and where he will show up! Genesis 1-11 details man’s creation, fall, judgment, and then continuing rebellion. At the Tower of Babel we realize that God’s covenant with Noah hasn’t fixed the human problem: man is still trying to live life without God in the picture. So God splits up humanity, and comes to one man and promises that through him these newly-formed nations will be blessed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Read Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18-20; 22:15-18. What three things does God promise Abraham here?***

God promised Abraham 3 things: (1) numerous offspring (***seed***) that would become a great nation (2) the ***land*** of Canaan and (3) a worldwide ***blessing***. We will look at each of these in this lesson.

1. **God promised Abraham a seed (Genesis 12:2; 15:13, 18; 17:4-8).**
2. **God’s initial promise (Genesis 12:2)**

God promises Abraham a son, and not just a son, but a whole nation who will come through that son. This promise is given from the beginning of the story and reiterated throughout. Unfortunately, Abraham and Sarah don’t have children, so they try to have a child with Hagar, Sarah’s maid. As you might imagine, that goes horribly wrong. Abraham and Sarah struggled with how God would fulfill his Word, so they started looking for their own solution rather than waiting on God’s timing.

***In what ways do modern believers struggle with the same dilemma as Abraham?***

***Have their ever been times in your life when it seemed impossible for God to keep his Word? How have you seen him work? Have you ever impatiently tried to solve problems only God can solve?***

1. **God reaffirms the promise**

God doubles down on the promise he originally made to Abraham, however, despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah were very old and Sarah was barren. In fact, Abraham and Sarah don’t believe this is even possible (Genesis 17:15-21; 18:9-15), because humanly speaking, it wasn’t.

***Why do you think God took as long as he did? How would the story have been different if Sarah had a child at 30? How might God be doing something similar in your life?***

God makes very clear in this whole narrative that the special ***seed*** would come through Isaac, not Ishmael. Later he clarifies that the promised seed would be through Jacob, not Esau. Eventually, Jacob is renamed Israel and his descendants end up being that nation that God works through. And this nation of Israel is crucially important for God’s plan because it is through this nation that God will eventually bring Jesus, the Seed that will crush the head of the serpent.

***In what ways do we see Satan trying to destroy the seed of Abraham throughout the story of Abraham and his descendants? How does God’s grace protect and provide for the seed in these situations?***

1. **God promised Abraham land.**
2. **God’s initial promise (Genesis 12:1; 15:18-21)**

God also clearly told Abraham that his descendants would own the land of Canaan, from the River of Egypt[[5]](#footnote-5) to the Euphrates River. That is a big portion of land!

Abraham never saw any of that land, however. He died owning one burial plot that he paid good money for (Genesis 23). The author of Hebrews points out this irony when notes that “he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:”(Hebrews 9:11). Here are 3 generations living in the land God promised to them as if they were in a foreign country.

***Will Abraham ever live in this land? How can this be an encouragement to us today?***

1. **The temporary fulfillment of the promise (1 Kings 4:21).**

So did Israel end up owning this land? The answer is yes, but very temporarily. Under the reign of Solomon, it would seem that this entire plot was owned by Israel (1 Kings 4:21). However, immediately after Solomon’s death the nation of Israel split under Solomon’s son Rehoboam into Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom), and it was all downhill from there.

1. **The final fulfillment (Genesis 17:8)**

God promised Abraham that his children would possess the land as “an everlasting possession.” And while for a time Israel did possess the land, unfortunately she later forfeited it because of her disobedience. God allowed first the northern ten tribes, then Judah in the south to go into captivity. But that is not the end. After Israel was exiled from Israel God promised that she would one day have full and glorious return to the land (Ezekiel 37:11-14). Israel did in fact return to the land after Persia conquered Babylon and let the Jews return home, but it was not exactly the beautiful and glorious return they were expecting and hoping for. Fortunately, God does tell us that there is still a future for the ethnic nation of Israel (Romans 11:26), and the return that Israel is awaiting will happen after the tribulation and will begin the Millennial kingdom.

***What does this teach us about the nature of God?***

***We see here that man’s sinfulness cannot void the promises of God. How can teaching like this be helpful? How might it be abused?***

1. **God promised Abraham a blessing (Genesis 12:2-3; 22:15-18).**

The third part of God’s covenant is important for us, because it is this promise of a blessing that the New Testament applies to those of us who are Gentiles. God promised Abraham that in his offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed. But what exactly does this mean? This promise, unlike the seed and land promises, isn’t developed as clearly in the rest of the Old Testament. So to answer that question, we will need to go to the New Testament.

1. **Peter’s application (Acts 3:25)**

Peter is preaching in this section (Acts 3:11-26) to fellow Jews explaining their need to accept Jesus following the healing of a lame man (Acts 3:1-10). He argues that Jesus is the greatest prophets, and that all the other prophets have pointed to him. He reminds them at this point of the covenant God made with Abraham and of the specific promise God made that in Abraham’s seed (Jesus) all the nations would be blessed. In the next verse, Peter notes that God sent Jesus to be a blessing first to the Jews (cf Romans 1:16) and then to the rest of the world.

***How does verse 26 describe the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant? How does Jesus accomplish this?***

1. **Paul’s application (Galatians 3:7-9)**

Paul also points back specifically to this point and quotes this portion of the covenant to explain what God is up to through Jesus. Here, the application is not to the Jews, but specifically to the Gentiles (*heathen*, same Greek word translated as Gentiles).

***How does Paul apply the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant?***

***According to this passage, how does one gain the blessing of Abraham?***

***How can Paul say that God preached the gospel to Abraham in this tiny little phrase?[[6]](#footnote-6)***

The story of Abraham was hugely important for the Jewish people, and rightfully so. When they argued with Christ, they proudly called themselves, “the children of Abraham” (John 8:39). Not the children of Isaac, or the children of Noah, or even the children of Jacob. They were Abraham’s children! Israel recognized that what God had promised Abraham was huge, and they believed that he was going to fulfill that promise!

The promise of a nation, the promise of the land, and the promise of a universal blessing all point to and are fulfilled in Jesus! Realizing God’s plan from the beginning and seeing him at work in the life of Abraham ought to give us confidence in our God and his ability to fulfill his promises, to us and to the world.

1. Noah (Genesis 9:9-17); Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 15:18; 17; 26:1-5; 28:13-15); Israel (Exodus 19:5; 24:7-8); Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-12); David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Several other figures initiated covenants between people and God: Jehoida (2 Kings 11:17); Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:10); Josiah (2 Kings 23:3); Ezra (Ezra 10:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Noahic covenant will not be covered for sake of time, and because it does not play as directly into the coming of Christ. It is, however, a major covenant made with all mankind. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These can be found at 2:4 (Heavens and Earth); 5:1 (Adam); 6:9 (Noah); 10:1 (Noah’s sons); 11:10 (Shem); 11:27 (Terah); 25:12 (Ishmael); 25:19 (Isaac); 36:1 (Esau); 37:2 (Jacob). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although this promise of God isn’t called a covenant in Genesis 12, the word is used later in Genesis 15:18 to promise Abraham that his descendants would have all the land that had been promised, and this was reiterated in Genesis 17:1-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is debate about whether this is the Nile or the wadi el ‘Arish (a wadi between Judea and Egypt). Probably this refers to the wadi, rather than the eastern bank of the Nile (cf 1 Kings 8:65; Ezekiel 47:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gospel means good news. God was hinting at the good news of Jesus Christ when he promised that through Abraham all the nations would be blessed, even though Abraham didn’t understand it all fully. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)