

An Everlasting Covenant



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 3:14; Gen. 17:1–6; Gen. 41:45; Dan. 1:7; Gen. 15:7–18; Gen. 17:1–14; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

Memory Text: “ ‘I [God] will establish my covenant between me and you [Abraham] and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you’ ” (*Genesis 17:7, RSV*).

How many remember distinctly in childhood a sickness or a touch of pneumonia that made us very ill, with the potential for something even worse? In the long, feverish night, we would awaken from a half sleep to see our mother or father sitting in a chair beside our bed in the soft glow of the night-light.

Just so, in a figurative, human sense, God sat by the bedside of a sin-sick world as moral darkness began to deepen in the centuries after the Flood. For this reason, He called out Abram and planned to establish through His faithful servant a people to whom He could entrust a knowledge of Himself and give salvation.

Therefore, God entered into a covenant with Abram and his posterity that emphasized in more detail the divine plan to save humankind from the results of sin. The Lord was not going to leave His world unattended, not with it in such dire need. This week, we will look at the unfolding of more covenant promises.

The Week at a Glance: What is the name of God? What does it mean? What was the significance of the names God used to identify Himself to Abram? What names did He use to identify Himself? Why did God change Abram's name to Abraham? Why are names important? What conditions, or obligations, were attached to the covenant?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 24.

Yahweh and the Abrahamic Covenant

“And he said unto him, I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it” (Gen. 15:7).

Names can sometimes be like trademarks. They become so closely associated in our minds with certain characteristics that when we hear the name we immediately recall these traits. What traits come to mind, for instance, when you think of these names: Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, or Dorcas? Each one is associated with certain characteristics and ideals.

During Bible times, people of the Near East attached great importance to the meaning of names. “The Hebrews always thought of a name as indicating either the personal characteristics of the one named, or the thoughts and emotions of the one giving the name, or attendant circumstances at the time the name was given.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 523.

When God first entered into a covenant relationship with Abram, He made Himself known to the patriarch under the name YHWH (pronounced Yahweh and translated as LORD, in capitals, in the King James Version [*Gen. 15:7*]). Thus, Genesis 15:7 reads literally, “I am YHWH who brought thee out of . . .”

The name YHWH, though appearing 6,828 times in the Old Testament, is somewhat shrouded in mystery. It seems to be a form of the verb *hayah*, ‘to be,’ in which case it would mean “the Eternal One,” “the Existent One,” “the Self-Existing One,” “the Self-Sufficient One,” or “the One who lives eternally.” The divine attributes that seem to be emphasized by this title are those of self-existence and faithfulness. They point to the Lord as the living God, the Source of life, in contrast with the gods of the heathen, which had no existence apart from the imagination of their worshipers.

God Himself explains the meaning of Yahweh in Exodus 3:14: “‘I AM WHO I AM’ ” (*RSV, NASB*). This meaning expresses the reality of God’s unconditioned existence, while it also suggests His rule over past, present, and future.

Yahweh also is God’s personal name. The identification of Yahweh as the One who brought Abram out of Ur refers to the announcement of God’s covenant with him in Genesis 12:1–3. God wants Abram to know His name, because that name reveals aspects of His identity, personal nature, and character—and from this knowledge we can learn to trust in His promises (*Ps. 9:10, Ps. 91:14*).

When you think of or hear the name Yahweh, what traits or characteristics automatically come to mind? Those of love, kindness, and care, or those of fear, strictness, and discipline? What thoughts automatically come to mind when you think of the name Jesus?

'El-Shaddai

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1).

Yahweh had appeared to Abram several times before (*Gen. 12:1, 7; Gen. 13:14; Gen. 15:1, 7, 18*). Now, in the above text, Yahweh again appears to Abram (“the LORD appeared to Abram”), presenting Himself as “Almighty God”—a name that is used with two exceptions only in the books of Genesis and Job. The name “Almighty God” consists first of *'El*, the basic name for God used among the Semites. Though the exact meaning of *Shaddai* is not entirely certain, the translation “Almighty” seems the most accurate. (*Compare Isa. 13:6 and Joel 1:15.*) The crucial idea in the use of this name seems to be that of contrasting the might and power of God with the weakness and frailty of humanity.

Read Genesis 17:1–6, which helps place everything in the larger context. Why would the Lord at this time want to stress to Abram His might and power? What was God saying that would require Abram to trust in that might and power? Look particularly at Genesis 17:6.

A literal translation of Genesis 17:1–6 would be: “Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said, ‘I am *'El-Shaddai*; walk before Me, and be thou perfect; and I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . . And thou shalt be a father of a multitude of nations, . . . and I will make thee exceedingly fruitful.’ ” This same name also appears in Genesis 28:3, where Isaac says that *'El-Shaddai* will bless Jacob, make him fruitful, and multiply him.

A similar promise of *'El-Shaddai* is found in Genesis 35:11, Genesis 43:14, and Genesis 49:25, passages that suggest the bountifulness exercised by God: *'El*, the God of power and authority, and *Shaddai*, the God of inexhaustible riches, riches that He is willing to bestow upon those who seek Him in faith and obedience.

It has been said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, the idea being that the name does not matter. Yet, how much comfort and hope would you have if the Lord’s name was “The Frail God” or “The Weak God”? Look at the text for today. Replace “Almighty God” with these two other names. What would it do for your faith and trust in Him if the Lord were to present Himself to us in that manner? At the same time, how does the name *'El-Shaddai* give us comfort?

From Abram to Abraham (*Gen. 17:4, 5*)

Though the names of God come with spiritual and theological significance, such usage does not end with God alone. Names of people in the ancient Near East were not just meaningless forms of identification, as often they are to us. To name a girl *Mary* or *Susy* does not make much of a difference today. For the ancient Semites, however, human names came heavy-laden with spiritual significance. All Semitic names of people have meaning and usually consist of a phrase or short sentence comprised of a wish or an expression of gratitude on the part of the parent. For example, *Daniel* means “God is my judge”; *Joel* means “Yahweh is God”; *Nathan* means “Gift of God.”

Because of the significance attached to names, names would often be changed to reflect a radical change in someone’s life and circumstances.

Look up the following texts. What situations are they addressing, and why were the names changed in these situations?

Gen. 32:28 _____

Gen. 41:45 _____

Dan. 1:7 _____

In one sense, however, it is not that hard, even for modern minds, to understand the significance of what a person is called. There are subtle and, at times, not-so-subtle effects. If someone is constantly called “stupid” or “ugly,” and if those are the appellations used for them all the time by a lot of people—sooner or later those names could have an impact on how the person views himself or herself. In the same way, by giving people certain names or changing their names, it seems possible to influence how they would view themselves and thus influence how they would act.

With this in mind, it is not so hard to understand why God would want to change Abram to Abraham. Abram means “Father is exalted”; God changed it to Abraham, which means “Father of a multitude.” When you look at the covenant promise in which God says “ ‘I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you’ ” (*Gen. 17:6, RSV*), the name change makes more sense. Perhaps it was God’s way of helping Abraham trust in the covenant promise, which was being made to a 99-year-old man married to an old woman who had up until this time been barren. In short, God did it to help increase Abraham’s faith in God’s promises to him.

Covenant Stages *(Gen. 12:1, 2)*

In those two verses, the first stage of God's covenant promise to Abram (there are three) is revealed. God approached Abram, gave him a command and then made him a promise. The *approach* expresses God's gracious election of Abram to be the first major figure of His special covenant of grace. The *command* involves the test of total trust in God (*Heb. 11:8*). The *promise* (*Gen. 12:1–3, 7*), though made specifically to Abram's descendants, ultimately includes a promise to the whole human race (*Gen. 12:3, Gal. 3:6–9*).

The second stage of God's covenant with Abram appears in Genesis 15:7–18. In what verses do we find some of the same steps that appeared in the first stage?

The approach of God to man—verses? _____

The call to human obedience—verses? _____

The divine promise—verses? _____

In the solemn ritual of the second stage, the Lord appeared to Abram and passed between the carefully arranged pieces of animals. Each of the three animals was slaughtered and divided, and the two halves were placed one against the other, with a space between. The birds were killed but not divided. Those entering into the covenant were to walk between the divided pieces, symbolically vowing perpetual obedience to the provisions thus solemnly agreed upon.

Describe what took place during the third and final stage of divine covenant making with Abraham. (*See Gen. 17:1–14.*)

The meaning of the name Abraham underscores God's desire and design to save all peoples. The "many nations" would include *both* Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the true descendants of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham and who trust in the merits of the promised Messiah. (*See Gal. 3:7, 29.*) Thus, as far back as Abraham, the Lord's intention was to save as many human beings as He could, whatever nations they lived in. No doubt, it's no different today.

Read Revelation 14:6, 7, the first angel's message. What parallels can you find between what the angel is saying and what happened in the Abrahamic covenant? In what ways are the issues the same?

Covenant Obligations

“For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen. 18:19).

As we have seen so far, the covenant is always a covenant of grace, of God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. There is no exception in the covenant with Abraham.

In His grace, God had chosen Abraham as His instrument to assist in proclaiming the plan of salvation to the world. God’s fulfillment of His covenant promises was, however, linked to Abraham’s willingness to do righteously and to obey Him by faith. Without that obedience on Abraham’s part, God could not use him.

Genesis 18:19 demonstrates how grace and law are related. It opens with *grace* (“I know him”) and is followed by the fact that Abraham is someone who will obey the Lord and have his family obey, as well. Faith and works, then, appear here in a close union, as they must. (*See James 2:17.*)

Notice, however, the phrasing of Genesis 18:19, particularly the last clause. What is it saying here about Abraham’s obedience? Though obedience is not the means of salvation, what importance is it given here? According to this text, could the covenant be fulfilled without it? Explain your answer.

The blessings of the covenant could not be enjoyed or maintained unless certain conditions were met by the beneficiaries. Though the conditions were not needed to establish the covenant, meeting them was to be the response of love, faith, and obedience. It was to be the manifestation of a relationship between humankind and God. Obedience was the means by which God could fulfill His covenant promises to the people.

Covenant breaking, through disobedience, is unfaithfulness to an established relationship. When the covenant is broken, what is broken is not the condition of bestowal but the condition of fulfillment.

In your own experience with the Lord, can you see why obedience is so important? Can you think of any examples, either from the Bible or from your own experience, where disobedience makes the fulfillment of covenant promises impossible? If so, what are they, and, more important, what is the remedy?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Call of Abraham,” pp. 125–131, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–200, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

The rainbow is a sign of God’s covenant with Noah. Read Genesis 17:10 to discover what was the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham. Circumcision “was destined: (1) to distinguish the seed of Abraham from the Gentiles (*Eph. 2:11*), (2) to perpetuate the memory of Jehovah’s covenant (*Gen. 17:11*), (3) to foster the cultivation of moral purity (*Deut. 10:16*), (4) to represent righteousness by faith (*Rom. 4:11*), (5) to symbolize circumcision of the heart (*Rom. 2:29*), and (6) to foreshadow the Christian rite of baptism (*Col. 2:11, 12*).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pp. 322, 323.

The rainbow will remain as a sign of God’s promise until the end of the world, but the sign of circumcision will not. According to the apostle Paul, circumcision was received by Abraham as a token of the righteousness he had received by faith in God (*Rom. 4:11*). However, through the centuries, circumcision came to signify salvation by obedience to the law. By New Testament times, circumcision had lost its biblical significance. Instead, the essential element is faith in Jesus Christ, which leads to an obedient, transformed life. Read Galatians 5:6; Galatians 6:15; and 1 Corinthians 7:18, 19.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the relationship between faith and works. Can there be one without the other? If not, why not?
- 2 “Many are still tested as was Abraham. They do not hear the voice of God speaking directly from the heavens, but He calls them by the teachings of His Word and the events of His providence. They may be required to abandon a career that promises wealth and honor, to leave congenial and profitable associations, and separate from kindred, to enter upon what appears to be only a path of self-denial, hardship, and sacrifice. God has a work for them to do; but a life of ease and the influence of friends and kindred would hinder the development of the very traits essential for its accomplishment. He calls them away from human influences and aid, and leads them to feel the need of His help, and to depend upon Him alone, that He may reveal Himself to them. Who is ready at the call of Providence to renounce cherished plans and familiar associations?”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 126, 127. Discuss any contemporary examples of those you know who heeded this same call.

Summary: God called Abraham into a special relationship with Him, one that would reveal the plan of salvation to the world.