

# The Covenant *With* Abraham



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Genesis 15–19:29; Rom. 4:3, 4, 9, 22; Gal. 4:21–31; Rom 4:11; Rom. 9:9; Amos 4:11.*

**Memory Text:** “But Abram said, ‘Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’” (*Genesis 15:2, NKJV*).

**W**ith *Genesis 15*, we come to the crucial moment when God formalizes His covenant with Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant is the second covenant, after the covenant with Noah.

Like Noah's covenant, Abraham's covenant involves other nations, as well, for ultimately, the covenant with Abraham is part of the everlasting covenant, which is offered to all humanity (*Gen. 17:7, Heb. 13:20*).

This episode of Abraham's life is full of fear and laughter. Abram is afraid (*Gen. 15:1*), as are Sarah (*Gen. 18:15*) and Hagar (*Gen. 21:17*). Abram laughs (*Gen. 17:17*), and Sarah (*Gen. 18:12*), and Ishmael, too (*Gen. 21:9, ESV*). These chapters resonate with human sensitivity and warmth. Abram is passionate about the salvation of the wicked Sodomites; he is caring toward Sarah, Hagar, and Lot; and he is hospitable toward the three foreigners (*Gen. 18:2–6*).

It is in this context that Abram, whose name implies nobility and respectability, will have his name changed into Abraham, which means “father of many nations” (*Gen. 17:5*). Thus, we see here more hints of the universal nature of what God plans to do through His covenant with Abraham.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 14.

## The Faith of Abraham

**Read** Genesis 15:1–21 and Romans 4:3, 4, 9, 22. How does Abram reveal what it means to live by faith? What is the meaning of the sacrifice that God had Abram perform?

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God’s first response to Abram’s concern about an heir (*Gen. 15:1–3*) is that he will have a son from his “own body” (*Gen. 15:4, NKJV*). The same language is used by the prophet Nathan to refer to the seed of the future Messianic King (*2 Sam. 7:12*). Abram was reassured and “believed in the LORD” (*Gen. 15:6*), because he understood that the fulfillment of God’s promise depended not on his own righteousness but on God’s (*Gen. 15:6; compare with Rom. 4:5, 6*).

This notion is extraordinary, especially in that culture. In the religion of the ancient Egyptians, for instance, judgment was made on the basis of counting one’s human works of righteousness against the righteousness of the goddess Maat, who represented divine righteousness. In short, you had to earn “salvation.”

God then sets up a sacrificial ceremony for Abram to perform. Basically, the sacrifice points to Christ’s death for our sins. Humans are saved by grace, the gift of God’s righteousness, symbolized by these sacrifices. But this particular ceremony conveys specific messages for Abram. The preying of the vultures on the sacrificial animals (*Gen. 15:9–11*) means that Abram’s descendants will suffer slavery for a period of “four hundred years” (*Gen. 15:13*), or four generations (*Gen. 15:16*). Then in the fourth generation, Abram’s descendants “shall return here” (*Gen. 15:16, NKJV*).

The last scene of the sacrificial ceremony is dramatic: “a burning torch that passed between those pieces” (*Gen. 15:17, NKJV*). This extraordinary wonder signifies God’s commitment to fulfill His covenant promise of giving land to Abram’s descendants (*Gen. 15:18*).

The boundaries of this Promised Land, “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates” (*Gen. 15:18, NKJV*) remind us of the boundaries of the Garden of Eden (*compare with Gen. 2:13, 14*). This prophecy has, therefore, more in view than just the Exodus and a homeland for Israel. On the distant horizon of this prophecy, in Abraham’s descendants taking the country of Canaan, looms the idea of the end-time salvation of God’s people, who will return to the Garden of Eden.

**How can we learn to keep focused on Christ and His righteousness as our only hope of salvation? What happens if we try to start counting up our good works?**

## Abraham's Doubts

**Read** Genesis 16:1–16. What is the significance of Abram's decision to go with Hagar, even despite God's promise to him? How do the two women represent two attitudes of faith (*Gal. 4:21–31*)?

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When Abram doubted (*Gen. 15:2*), God unambiguously reassured him that he would have a son. Years later, Abram is still without a son. Even after God's last powerful prophecy, Abram seems to have lost his faith: he does not believe anymore that it will be possible for him to have a son with Sarai. Sarai, feeling hopeless, takes the initiative and urges him to resort to a common practice of that time in the ancient Near East: take a surrogate. Hagar, Sarai's servant, is appointed for this service. The system works. Ironically, this human strategy seemed more efficient than did faith in God's promises.

The passage describing Sarai's relation to Abram echoes the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The two texts share a number of common motifs (Sarai, like Eve, is active; Abram, like Adam, is passive) and share common verbs and phrases ("heed the voice," "take," and "give"). This parallel between the two stories implies God's disapproval of this course of action.

The apostle Paul refers to this story to make his point about works versus grace (*Gal. 4:23–26*). In both accounts, the result is the same: the immediate reward of human work outside the will of God leads to future troubles. Note that God is absent during the whole course of action. Sarai speaks about God but never speaks to Him; nor does God speak to either of them. This absence of God is striking, especially after the intense presence of God in the previous chapter.

God then appears to Hagar but only after she has left the house of Abram. This unexpected appearance discloses God's presence in spite of human attempts to work without Him. The reference to "the Angel of the LORD" (*Gen. 16:7, NKJV*) is a title that is often identified with the LORD, *YHWH* (see *Gen. 18:1, 13, 22*). This time it is God who takes the initiative and announces to Hagar that she will give birth to a son, Ishmael, whose name means God hears (*Gen. 16:11*). Ironically, the story, which ends with the idea of hearing (*shama'*), echoes the hearing at the beginning of the story, when Abram "heeded" (*shama'*) the voice of Sarai (*Gen. 16:2*).

**Why is it so easy for us to have the same lack of faith that Abram had here?**

## The Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant

**Read** Genesis 17:1–19 and Romans 4:11. What is the spiritual and prophetic significance of the circumcision rite?

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Abram's lack of faith, as seen in the preceding story (*Genesis 16*), broke the flow of Abram's spiritual journey with God. During that time God was silent. But now, God speaks again to Abram. God reconnects with Abram and brings him back to the point when He made a covenant with Abram (*Gen. 15:18*).

Now, though, God gives him the sign of that covenant. The meaning of circumcision has been long discussed by scholars, but because the rite of circumcision involves the shedding of blood (*see Exod. 4:25*), it could be understood in the context of sacrifice, signifying that righteousness was imputed to him (*compare with Rom. 4:11*).

It also is significant that this covenant, signified by circumcision, is described in terms that point back to the first Messianic prophecy (*compare Gen. 17:7 with Gen. 3:15*). The parallel between the two texts suggests that God's promise to Abram concerns more than just the physical birth of a people; it contains the spiritual promise of salvation for all the peoples of the earth. And the promise of the "everlasting covenant" (*Gen. 17:7*) refers to the work of the Messianic Seed, the sacrifice of Christ that ensures eternal life to all who claim it by faith and all that faith entails (*compare with Rom. 6:23 and Titus 1:2*).

Interestingly, this promise of an eternal future is contained in the change of the names of Abram and Sarai. The names of Abram and Sarai referred just to their present status: Abram means "exalted father" and Sarai means "my princess" (the princess of Abram). The change of their names into "Abraham" and "Sarah" referred to the future: Abraham means "father of many nations" and Sarah means "the princess" (for everyone). In parallel, but not without some irony, the name of Isaac ("he will laugh") is a reminder of Abraham's laughter (the first laughter recorded in the Scriptures, *Gen. 17:17*); it is a laughter of skepticism or, maybe, of wonder. Either way, though he believed in what the Lord had clearly promised him, Abraham still struggled with living it out in faith and trust.

**How can we learn to keep on believing even when, at times, we struggle with that belief, as did Abraham? Why is it important that we not give up, despite times of doubt?**

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## The Son of Promise

The last scene of circumcision involved everyone: not only Ishmael—but also all the males of Abraham’s household were circumcised (*Gen. 17:23–27*). The word *kol*, “all,” “every,” is repeated four times (*Gen. 17:23, 27*). It is against this inclusive background that God appears to Abraham to confirm the promise of a son, “Isaac.”

**Read Genesis 18:1–15 and Romans 9:9. What lessons of hospitality do we learn from Abraham’s reception of his visitors? How do you explain God’s response to Abraham’s hospitality?**

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It is not clear whether Abraham knew who these strangers were (*Heb. 13:2*), even though he acted toward them as if God Himself were among them. He was sitting “in the tent door in the heat of the day” (*Gen. 18:1, NKJV*), and because visitors are rare in the desert, he was probably longing to meet with them. Abraham ran toward the men (*Gen. 18:2*), although he was 99 years old. He called one of these persons Adonai, “my Lord” (*Gen. 18:3*), a title often used for God (*Gen. 20:4, Exod. 15:17*). He rushed around them in the preparation of the meal (*Gen. 18:6, 7*). He stood next to them, attentive to their needs and ready to serve them (*Gen. 18:8*).

Abraham’s behavior toward heavenly strangers will become an inspiring model of hospitality (*Heb. 13:2*). In fact, Abraham’s attitude of reverence conveys a philosophy of hospitality. Showing respect and care toward strangers is not just a nice gesture of courtesy. The Bible emphasizes that it is a religious duty, as if directed toward God Himself (*compare with Matt. 25:35–40*). Ironically, God is identified more with the hungry and needy foreigner than with the generous one who receives them.

On the other hand, the divine intrusion into the human sphere denotes His grace and love toward humanity. This appearance of God anticipates Christ, who left His heavenly home and became a human servant to reach humankind (*Phil. 2:7, 8*). God’s appearance here provides evidence for the certainty of His promise (*Gen. 18:10, NKJV*). He sees Sarah, who hides herself “behind him” (*Gen. 18:10*), and knows her most intimate thoughts (*Gen. 18:12*). He knows that she laughed, and the word “laugh” is His last word. Her skepticism becomes the place where He will fulfill His word.

**Dwell more on the idea that “God is identified more with the hungry and needy foreigner than with the generous one who receives them.” Why is this concept so important for us to remember?**

## Lot in Sodom

**Read** Genesis 18:16–19:29. How does Abraham’s prophetic ministry affect his responsibility toward Lot?

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God’s promise of a son to Abraham has just been reconfirmed. Yet, instead of enjoying the good news, he engages God in a passionate discussion about the fate of Lot in Sodom. Abraham not only is a prophet to whom God reveals His will; but he also is a prophet who intercedes on behalf of the wicked. The Hebrew phrase “stood before the LORD” (*Gen. 18:22, NKJV*) is an idiom for praying.

In fact, Abraham challenges God and bargains with Him to save Sodom, where his nephew resides. Moving from 50 down to 10, God would have saved the people of Sodom if only 10 Sodomites had been righteous.

Of course, when we read the story of what happened when the two angels came to Lot to warn him of what was coming (*Gen. 19:1–10*), we can see just how sick and evil the people had become. It truly was a wicked place, as were many of the nations around them; one reason why, eventually, they were driven from the land (*see Gen. 15:16*).

“And now the last night of Sodom was approaching. Already the clouds of vengeance cast their shadows over the devoted city. But men perceived it not. While angels drew near on their mission of destruction, men were dreaming of prosperity and pleasure. The last day was like every other that had come and gone. Evening fell upon a scene of loveliness and security. A landscape of unrivaled beauty was bathed in the rays of the declining sun. The coolness of eventide had called forth the inhabitants of the city, and the pleasure-seeking throngs were passing to and fro, intent upon the enjoyment of the hour.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 157, 158.

In the end, God saved only Lot, his wife, and his two daughters (*Gen. 19:15*), almost half the minimum of 10. The sons-in-law, who did not take Lot’s warning seriously, remained in the city (*Gen. 19:14*).

That beautiful country was, then, destroyed. The Hebrew verb *hafakh*, “overthrew,” occurs several times in this passage (*Gen. 19:21, 25, 29*) and characterizes the destruction of Sodom (*Deut. 29:23, Amos 4:11*). The idea is that the country has been “reversed.” Just as the Flood “reversed” the original creation (*Gen. 6:7*), the destruction of Sodom is a “reversal” of the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 13:10*). In the destruction of Sodom, we are given a precursor of end-time destruction, as well (*see Jude 7*).

**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 370–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

Abraham’s patient and tenacious plea with God on behalf of the people of Sodom (*Gen. 18:22–33*) should encourage us to pray for the wicked, even though they appear to be in a hopeless condition of sin. Furthermore, God’s attentive response to Abraham’s insistence, and His willingness to forgive for the sake of only “ten” righteous men is a “revolutionary” concept, as pointed out by Gerhard Hasel:

“In an extremely revolutionary manner the old collective thinking, which brought the guiltless member of the guilty association under punishment, has been transposed into something new: the presence of a remnant of righteous people could have a preserving function for the whole. . . . For the sake of the righteous remnant Yahweh would in his righteousness [*tsedaqah*] forgive the wicked city. This notion is widely expanded in the prophetic utterance of the Servant of Yahweh who works salvation ‘for many.’ ”—Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea From Genesis to Isaiah*, 3rd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1980), pp. 150, 151.

“All around us are souls going down to ruin as hopeless, as terrible, as that which befell Sodom. Every day the probation of some is closing. Every hour some are passing beyond the reach of mercy. And where are the voices of warning and entreaty to bid the sinner flee from this fearful doom? Where are the hands stretched out to draw him back from death? Where are those who with humility and persevering faith are pleading with God for him? The spirit of Abraham was the spirit of Christ. The Son of God is Himself the great Intercessor in the sinner’s behalf. He who has paid the price for its redemption knows the worth of the human soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 140.

## Discussion Questions:

- ① Only the rainbow and circumcision are called “sign of the covenant.” What are the common points and the differences between the two covenants?
- ② Though called of God, and though often used in the New Testament as the example of what it means to live by faith, Abraham at times faltered. What lessons should we learn and not learn from his example?
- ③ Some people argue against the idea that God will punish the lost, saying that this act would be against God’s love. How do we, as those who believe that—yes, God will punish the lost—respond to the argument that He doesn’t?