

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Genesis 12–13; 15

Memory Verse: *"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"* (Rom. 4:3 ESV).

Background Helps:

After the Flood of Noah's day, the human race multiplied and wickedness once again increased. Even righteous Noah sinned (Gen. 9:20ff.)! The rebellion of mankind was especially seen in the plan to build the Tower of Babel, a proud attempt of people on earth to make a name for themselves apart from God and to prevent the dispersion of the human race (11:4), contrary to God's earlier instructions (1:28; 9:1, 7). So God confused the language of the people, divided them into a multitude of nations, and dispersed them over the face of the earth (10:1–11:9).

Genesis 12 brings us to a turning point in God's covenant story. God's covenant with Noah was more general in nature. But now, out of all the nations and peoples on earth, God chose one man and one nation, with whom to establish a covenant and, by means of this covenant, to reverse the effects of the Fall (Gen. 3) and reconcile all peoples to himself. This man was Abram (later called Abraham). The idea that God was establishing a covenant with Abram is not specifically stated until Genesis 15:18, but he begins to unfold his promises to Abram as early as Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV):

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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

It is not an exaggeration to say that these promises in Genesis 12:1-3 contain in capsule form the story of the rest of the Bible, both Old Testament and New. The LORD spells out these promises to Abram in increasing detail as the story unfolds: see Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:4-5, 7, 13-16, 18-21 from this week's readings. There are three main promises:

1. A seed (offspring): Genesis 12:2; 13:16; 15:4-5
2. A land: 12:7; 13:14-15, 17; 15:7, 18-21
3. A blessing to all nations: 12:3

This third promise is the climactic one, because God's intention in establishing his covenant with Abram and his seed was, ultimately, to bring God's salvation to all peoples on earth—which is why Paul quotes Genesis 12:3 in Galatians 3:8 and says that this promise is the gospel! Also, in Genesis 12:2-3 notice the emphasis on God's promise to "bless" Abram, echoing his previous "blessing" of Adam (Gen. 1:28) and of Noah (Gen. 9:1) and indicating that through Abram God's original intention to "bless" the entire human race will be realized.

Our memory verse, Romans 4:3, is a quotation of Genesis 15:6 which records Abram's response to God's promise: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." This verse is quoted by Peter in Acts 3:25, applying it to Jews, and quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:8, applying it to Gentiles. It is the basis of Paul's exposition of the great doctrine of justification by faith in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Both Jews and Gentiles now have the opportunity to be justified by faith and to become true sons of Abraham and sons of God through Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:7, 26, 28-29).

The promises of God to Abram became formally ratified as a covenant in Genesis 15:9-10, 17-21. To gain insight into this unusual covenant-making ceremony, read the similar scene in Jeremiah 34:18-19 (read these verses in context). But notice that in Genesis 15 God alone (his presence symbolized by the smoking fire pot and flaming torch) passed between the animal carcasses, indicating that the promise of this covenant with Abram depended on God alone.

Lesson Helps:

A possible aim: My students will learn about the establishment of God's covenant with Abram, so that they will believe in Jesus Christ and be counted as right with God.

Set the context for God's covenant with Abram in the overall biblical narrative (see Background Helps above), using a Bible timeline and map of the Old Testament world.

Then conduct a Bible exploration in class of the promises that God gave to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-18; 15:4-5, 7, 13-21. Be sure to include the scene in Genesis 15:7-21 where God formally established the covenant with Abram, that is, bound himself to keep these promises to the patriarch.

Then consider how Abram responded to these promises: (1) faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3) and (2) obedience (Gen. 12:4ff.), an obedience that was the fruit of his faith (see Heb. 11:8). Review the memory verse.

Finally, apply this lesson to your students by reviewing Paul's commentary on Genesis 15 in Romans 4:1-5, 22-25—which is the Friday Bible reading. Challenge your students to put their faith in Jesus Christ, either trusting him for the first time in order to become right with God or confirming their faith in him as the basis of their continued right standing with God. Also, is their faith evidenced by a life of obedience?

Home Assignment:

 Read Genesis 16:1–18:15.

 Memorize Genesis 17:1b.