

### 3. God's Promises to Abraham (Answers) Genesis 12, 15, 17

**Introduction:** This lesson begins a short series on the overview of the Bible. The idea is to help you understand what the Bible is all about and how it all fits together. We'll also explain how to interpret its various parts, especially as relates to New Covenant Theology.

**Most people know that the Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each section has a number of different books within it.**

**How many books are in the Old Testament?** There are 39 books. An easy way to remember this, a trick way of sorts, is to count the number of letters in each word: Old = 3 letters and testament = 9 letters. There are 39 books in the Old Testament.

**How many books are in the New Testament?** There are 27 New Testament books. A silly way to remember this is to take the number 39 (the number of books in the Old Testament) and multiply the 3 times the 9:  $3 \times 9 = 27$ . There are 27 books in the New Testament!

**How many books in the whole Bible?**  $39 + 27 = 66$ . A fun way to remember this is to consider a translator named J. B. Phillips. Brother Phillips translated the 27 books of the New Testament from Greek into English. It is called the Phillips Translation. Although he never did it, if he had also translated the 39 books of the Old Testament, he could have put them both together and called it "Phillips 66" (like the gas station).

**What does the archaic English word "testament" mean (as in "Old Testament")?** It fundamentally means "covenant, contract." There are a number of different contracts in the Bible between God and man. Two of the big ones are the "old" covenant and the "new" covenant. In the studies ahead we will learn what these different covenants are and why they are significant. These covenants form sort of a skeleton for the Bible.

The actual old covenant is the one made between God and the nation of Israel and Mt. Sinai and mediated by Moses. However, the first covenant that we'll study is not the old one, but one that comes before it, one made between God and Abraham. Arguably, the two most important people in the Bible are Jesus and Abraham (not Adam, nor Moses or even David). Genesis 1-11 is just an introduction to get the reader ready to meet Abraham. The whole rest of the Bible is the story of Abraham and his children (both physical and spiritual). **God's covenant with Abraham is the basis for the coming of Jesus, the new covenant and the forgiveness of sins.**

#### The Promises Made

**\*\*\*\*What did the Lord call Abram to do (Genesis 12:1-3)?** God called Abram to leave his home country and go to a new land.

**Where was Abraham living when he got the call to move? See 11:31.**

**PPT>>>** Abram had at first been in the city of Ur (near ancient Babylon) in the country of the Chaldeans (Babylonia; modern Iraq).

PPT>>> He then moved with to the city of Haran (in modern Turkey, near the Syrian border).

**1. What promises did God make to Abram (Genesis 12:1-3)?** See also 12:7, 13:14-15. God make three basic promises to Abram:

PPT>>> a.) To show (give) him the “land,” 12:1. See also 12:7a, 13:14-15.

PPT>>> b.) To make him into a great “nation” of people (“seed”), 12:2a. See also 12:7.

PPT>>> c.) All peoples on earth to be blessed through Abram (“blessing”), 12:3b.

Remember these three promises (land, seed, blessing). They show up again and again throughout Genesis.

**2. What problem had Abram and his wife been having that made this seed promise so significant (12:2)?** See back to 11:30 and also 12:4 (Sarah was barren and Abraham was 75 years old).

### The Covenant Cut

\*\*\*\***What question did Abram ask God in 15:1-3?** Abram evidently was curious to know how God’s promise of seed would be fulfilled since he had never had any children, 15:2. (Abram was over 75 years old when he asked this).

**3. In Genesis 15:1, God told Abram not to be “afraid.” Based on Abram’s question to God (15:2), what is it that Abram might have been afraid of?** Perhaps Abram feared that the promise would be fulfilled via adoption.

**Who did Abram speculate would be his heir (15:2-3)?** Abram concluded that God intended for his servant Eliezer to be his heir.

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\*\*\*\***4. In Genesis 15:4-5, how did God answer Abram’s question?** God told Abram that he would have his own son who would be his heir and that he would have as many descendants as the stars of the heavens.

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\*\*\*\***5. According to Genesis 15:6, why did the Lord credit righteousness to Abram?** It was because Abraham believed God’s promise.

**Soteriology:** The earliest inspired writings indicate that salvation comes by faith (not works).

PPT>>> Romans 4:1ff

**6. In Romans 4:1-8, what theological mileage does the New Testament get out of Genesis 15:1-6?** Paul used Abraham's example to prove the doctrine of justification by faith.

**PPT>>> Romans 4:1-8**

7. Abraham believed that God would give life to his and Sarah's dead bodies. **According to Romans 4:18-25, what is it that we must believe in order to receive righteousness?** We must believe that God the Father gave life to the Jesus' dead, crucified body; that Jesus came back to life and rose from the dead. In a sense, there is no such thing as easy believism. It is not easy to believe that!

**Initial insights (To be more fully developed later):**

- a.) According to Paul, the information in Genesis 15 was written for "our sake" (4:23-24, for those of us in the new covenant). Everything in the Old Testament points to, leads up to, is fulfilled in, the New Testament. This emphasis is the basis of New Covenant Theology.
- b.) Paul wrote of the "blessing" (Ro 4:6-9) of being justified apart from works (one of the big three promises to Abram was a blessing).
- c.) Notice Paul's emphasis on "promise" (4:14, 16, 20). Elsewhere in the New Testament, a contrast is drawn between promise (the true Gospel) and "law" (4:13) or works (a false gospel).

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**\*\*\*\*What did Abram ask God about (Genesis 15:7-11)?** Abram seemed to want some sign or token or word of reassurance concerning the land promise. Notice that God had changed the issue from children to real estate, 15:7.

**What historical fact did God bring to Abram's attention in 15:7?**

**8. Why did God remind Abram of this (15:7)?** Compare 15:5-6. The promised "seed" needed a promised "land" on which to live. God evidently wanted to change the issue from children to land so that He could give Abraham reassurance about the land, too.

**What did God tell Abram to do in Genesis 15:9-11?**

**9. Why did God want Abram to cut these animals in half and then arrange the halves opposite each other (15:9-11)?** See *Jeremiah 34:18-19*. Though the meaning of all this is obscure to society today, it was quite common then. Archaeology has revealed that during Abram's lifetime, this is the way that treaties or covenants were made between kings. The technical term describing the event was that they would "cut a covenant", which points to the ancient rite of cutting an animal with the forming of the covenant. The animal was slaughtered and cut into two or three parts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> JD Douglas, ed., *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), 240.

**PPT>>> Jeremiah 34:18-19.** As seen in Jeremiah 34:18-19, the two parties of the covenant then passed between the pieces of the animals. The symbolism apparently was that if either party broke the covenant, then he would be killed just like the animals had been.<sup>2</sup>

**10. Why is the information contained in Genesis 15:11 significant?** Perhaps it is included to indicate that a fair amount of time passed after Abram cut the animals. He obviously had to wait a long time. Note that 15:5 occurred at night (“number the stars”). Perhaps Abram got up early the next morning to prepare the animals, and then waited patiently for God to act. It was not until sundown that God acted, 15:17.

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**\*\*\*\*According to Genesis 15:12-16, what happened to Abram as the sun was setting?** A deep sleep fell on Abram (15:12a), he was overcome with feelings of doom and gloom (15:12b) and then God spoke to him (15:13a).

**11. In 15:12-13, what gloomy prophecy did God make to Abram?** The prophecy was that Abraham’s descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years.

**12. What “land that is not theirs” is referred to in Genesis 15:13? See also Deuteronomy 5:15. This would be the land of Egypt.**

**Review: How long were Abram’s descendants going to be enslaved (15:13)?** They would be enslaved 400 years.

**What good news did God reveal to Abram in 15:14-16?** God said that Abram’s descendants would be freed and come out with great possessions.

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**\*\*\*\*What did the LORD make with Abram (Ge 15:17-21)?** God made a “covenant,” by walking between the pieces. The Hebrew literally says that God “cut a covenant” (just as we say, “cut a deal”).

**13. What was Abram doing during all this (15:17-21)? See 15:12.** Abraham was sleeping. This necessarily meant that he did not walk between the pieces as would normally have been the custom.

**Since Abraham was asleep, how did he know what had happened?** Perhaps God told him later; perhaps his servants told him; perhaps he saw it in a vision as it was happening; perhaps the smoking fire pot and flaming torch left a trail in the dirt.

**14. What is the significance of the smoking oven passing alone between the pieces (Ge 15:17-21)? See Jeremiah 34:18-19.** Normally both parties of a covenant passed between the pieces. The oven evidently represents God, and its movement between the pieces suggests

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<sup>2</sup> GC Aalders, *Jeremiah*, 296.

that it was a one-sided covenant. God alone is responsible for the fulfillment of the promises of the covenant.

**Note:** We are not told why God appeared in the form of a smoking oven.

**15. Test: Is this covenant conditional or unconditional (15:17-21)? Why? See Galatians 3:15-18.** It is unconditional since its fulfillment is guaranteed by God. Abram slept through its ratification! It is based on promise, not law.

**PPT>>> Galatians 3:15-18** (note the promise emphasis).

**16. What did God promise Abram in this covenant (Ge 15:18)?** The covenant concerned the land promise (real estate).

**17. What modern nations occupy this land (15:18)?** Basically, it is modern day Israel.

**PPT>>> Map:** If taken literally, it would include eastern Egypt (the Sinai Pen.), Israel, Lebanon, and Western Syria. Some have suggested that the “river of Egypt” refers not to the Nile, but to the modern Wadi el-Arish in northwestern Sinai. However, it seems unnatural to contrast the great Euphrates with anything less than the Nile.

### The Covenant Confirmed

25 years went past since God first made the promises and Abraham still did not have any children by Sarah. He was now 99 years old (17:18). God decided to confirm his covenant promises.

**\*\*\*\*18. What did God promise Abram in Genesis 17:7-8?** God promised to establish the covenant as an everlasting covenant, to be their God and to give them the land of Canaan forever.

**With whom besides Abram did God make this covenant (17:7)?** It was between Abram and all his offspring (seed).

**Review: According to 17:7, how long was this covenant to be in effect?** It was said to be everlasting.

**Review: According to 17:8, how long did God intend for Abram’s descendants to possess the land?** It was said to be an “everlasting possession.”

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**\*\*\*\*19. According to Genesis 17:9-14, what was the “sign” of God’s covenant with Abraham?** The sign of the covenant was circumcision, 17:11. The Jews still practice this today. In ancient society, covenants often had signs to remind the parties of the covenant obligations. We still do this today with the wedding ring, a sign of the marriage covenant.

**20. Why might God have picked circumcision as the sign of this covenant (17:10)?** See *Deuteronomy 7:1-4*. It probably had something to do with both the promise of reproduction (multitude of offspring) and ethnic purity (the offspring of Abraham were not to marry anyone outside the tribe, especially not the Canaanites).

**PPT>>> 21. The New Testament often draws spiritual lessons from the historical events of the Old Testament. According to Romans 4:9b-11a, why did Abraham receive the sign of circumcision (Ge 17:9-14)?** It was a “seal” (a guarantee) of the fact that God had already declared Abraham to be righteous because of Abraham’s faith. Circumcision did not come until over 13 years later. Circumcision was the sign of Abraham’s righteousness, not the substance, of his righteousness.

**Baptism Parallel:** In a sense, water baptism parallels circumcision. Abraham was justified by faith, not circumcision. Similarly, we are justified by faith, not baptism. Water baptism is an outward sign of an inward act of God (the new birth).

### So What?

**Review:** What are the “big three” promises God made to Abraham?

- 1.) “Land” (Canaan).
- 2.) “Seed” (offspring).
- 3.) “Blessing” (to all families on earth through Abraham’s seed).

**23. How do the following verses combine to show the importance of this covenant?**

**PPTS>>>** Genesis 18:16-19, 22:15-18, 26:1-6, 24, 28:10-15, 35:11-13, 46:1-4, 48:3-4, 50:24-25, Exodus 2:23-25, 6:2-8, 32:13, Joshua 14:9, 1 Chronicles 16:17-18, Psalm 105:10-11.

These promises are clearly a central theme throughout Genesis and indeed, the whole of the Old Testament. The exciting part is the insight that the New Testament writers give us concerning the Abrahamic Covenant and the ultimate fulfillments of the land, the seed and the blessing! The physical things promised to Abraham were just types and shadows of something much better, much greater!

**24. Based on Abraham’s example, how can a person be declared righteous by God; what will move God to credit righteousness to your account?**

**25. What lesson about water baptism can we derive from Abraham’s circumcision?**

\*\*\*\* = ask the class this question before having the text read aloud.

**Advance Study Questions.** If you send out the study questions in advance, then those exact same questions should be covered when you teach to give the brethren feedback and to encourage them to study the Scriptures at home during the week.

**Teacher’s Note:** These lessons were designed for a 45-minute session.

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