



# **ABRAHAM STUDY GUIDE**

**A 10 WEEK DEEP DIVE INTO THE  
LIFE & WALK OF ABRAHAM**

**PART 04**

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# COVENANT

## GENESIS 15

### A BOLD PROMISE

When we think of Abraham, we think of a man of unwavering faith, who trusted God in extraordinary ways and was greatly rewarded for it. When God told him to go, he went. What God told him to do, he did. And even when he was commanded to offer up his son, he did not hesitate. As a result, he stands as the forefather of the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments, a model for all who trust in the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”<sup>[1]</sup> But these things, which seem so clear to us in hindsight, were not always obvious.

He begins his story as Abram, a man called by God to go to a land not his own, clinging to God’s promises, the greatest of which is the stunning but ambiguous statement, “In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”<sup>[2]</sup> As we read on, God discloses more details of his plan, some of which seem only to complicate things. In Genesis 12:7, he tells Abram, “To your offspring I will give this land,” which is an odd promise to make to an elderly man who has no children of his own due to lifelong infertility. Who would be the offspring to inherit the promised blessings? The problem is compounded when we consider that, in the overall story of Genesis, we are already looking for an “offspring” of the woman to defeat the serpent.

[3] There is clearly a connection, but if so, why is God pinning the hope of all mankind on a man whose lineage seems destined to hit a brick wall?

The first candidate for an heir (the closest we can come to an offspring for Abraham at this point in the story) is his orphaned nephew Lot, who came with Abram from his homeland as part of his extended household. But it isn't long before the two are forced to separate, due to the inability of the land to support both their flocks. Lot leaves to live among the morally compromised but well-watered cities of the valley, some distance east of Abram's encampment near Hebron, and so it seems that he is no longer in the running.

So when God appears to Abram now in chapter 15, telling him not to fear, and that his "reward shall be very great," it is understandable that Abram would respond with skepticism: "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"<sup>[4]</sup> (vv. 1-2) Since Lot is out of the picture, the next logical choice for an heir is Abram's highest servant.

## **GOD DOUBLES DOWN**

The Lord isn't having any of that: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." He then leads Abram outside, directs his attention to the stars in the heavens, and tells him, "So shall your offspring be." Once again, Abram's faith swells up in his heart, he believes the Lord, and God reckons it to him as righteousness.<sup>[5]</sup> For all his acts of obedience, Abram's faith in God's seemingly impossible promises is what makes him righteous in God's eyes.<sup>[6]</sup> God's plans will be realized, not through a nephew, or a servant, but through a biological son who will be born to Abram, despite his own age, and despite his infertility.

But God is not finished. In verse 7, attention turns to God's promise of land. Abram is still confused and perhaps somewhat skeptical: "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"<sup>[7]</sup> Having lived nearly ten years in the land, and yet possessing none of it.<sup>[8]</sup> At this point, God could have said, "Because I said so, that's why!" Instead, he underscores his fidelity to his promise by establishing a formal covenant with Abram.

## **A VISION OF THE COVENANT**

First, God instructs Abram to bring out several animals, kill them, and to cut the large ones in half, laying them on the ground. Abram does then, and the God makes him fall into a deep sleep.<sup>[9]</sup> As Abram sleeps, God expands his promise to him, disclosing in stunning detail how and when Abram's offspring will come to possess the land of Canaan. God foretells

that they will be oppressed in a foreign land, but that then, after four hundred years, he will judge the nation that oppresses them, and will bring them back to give them the land currently possessed by the peoples of Canaan. Even the boundaries of the Promised land are delineated. All this would serve to instruct future generations of Abram's descendants that their plight in the land of Egypt is not the result of historical accident, but is rather part of God's overall plan to bring about their salvation, to judge the wicked (including the wicked inhabitants of Canaan), and to bless all the families of the earth through them.

But then something happens that would have been scandalous to the ancient readers of Genesis. A smoking firepot appears in Abram's dream, and it passes between the pieces of the slaughtered animals. As this happens, the Lord speaks: "To your offspring I give this land,"<sup>[10]</sup> and then he goes on to mark off the boundaries of it.

In order to grasp the gravity of this, some knowledge of covenant ceremonies is necessary. A "covenant" is a formal treaty between two parties. Numerous examples have been discovered from the ancient world throughout the Near East. Although the elements found in these differ (even in the Bible, they are not all the same), similarities often help us understand what we find in the Bible. For example, we find that the purpose of the slaughtered animals is to represent what will happen to the one who violates the terms of the covenant—namely death.<sup>[11]</sup> Moreover, the act of passing in between the pieces represents the binding of the party to the terms of the covenant. This can be seen in Jeremiah 34:18, where the Lord, speaking of the officials of Judah, says, "I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts."

The shocking aspect of what the Lord, clearly represented by the firepot, does in Abram's vision. It is he, not Abram, who passes between the pieces and obligates himself to fulfill the covenant. This is unusual, especially when there is a power imbalance between the two covenant parties and the agreement is not bilateral. Yet here, the Lord, who is clearly the superior, is the one who is bound to keep his end. Abram is simply a passive observer—he's not even conscious!

When the Lord submits himself to a covenant ceremony, it isn't because his word can't be trusted. Remember, Abram's simple belief in that word was credited to him as righteousness.<sup>[12]</sup> Rather, God, whose faithfulness is never in question, does this so that his people can have the assurance, through hundreds of years of foreign oppression, that he will be faithful to fulfill every word of his promise, which will culminate on an unimaginable blessing for all of humanity. Throughout the rest of Genesis, Abram and his family will be evaluated on whether or not they believe this—that

God's blessing depends on his own faithfulness, rather than our own ability to secure that blessing for ourselves.

[1] Romans 4:17.

[2] Genesis 12:3.

[3] Genesis 3:15.

[4] Genesis 15:1-2.

[5] Gen 15:6.

[6] See Romans 4. For Old Testament examples of "crediting/reckoning" a status to someone, see Leviticus 7:18; 17:4; Numbers 18:27; 2 Samuel 19:19; Psalm 32:2.

[7] Genesis 15:8.

[8] See Genesis 16:3.

[9] The same expression is used in Genesis 2:21 when God caused Adam to sleep while Eve was brought from his side.

[10]

[11] Gerhard Hasel, "The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15," JSOT 19 (1981): 61-78; Richard S. Hess, "The Slaughter of the Animals in Genesis 15," in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50* (ed. Richard S. Hess, Philip E. Satterthwaite, and Gordon J. Wenham; Cambridge: Tyn-dale, 1993), 55-65. The primary text for the most well-known treaty of this kind can be found in Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA 2; Helsinki: University Press, 1988), 8-9.

[12] Genesis 15:6.













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LOVING JESUS, LOVING PEOPLE, PLOWING A COUNTER-CULTURE

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