Unit 2, Session 1

God Makes a Promise

Summary and Goal
In the past few sessions, we have seen the tragic consequences of sin. One brother murdered another out of jealousy. Humanity became so wicked that God sent a flood of judgment. And people stood in open rebellion against God, refusing to obey His command to spread out; instead, they built a tower to bring glory to themselves. But we have also seen God’s grace on display each step of the way. God was patiently bringing about His plan to provide redemption to humanity.

In this session we will see that plan take a sizeable step forward with the call of Abraham. We will see that God works in ways that are different from ours and that He is wise—He knows the best possible means to bring His plan to pass. We will also see that God is not just trying to bring about what He has promised but that He is also working to produce faith and dependence in His people as well.

Session Outline
1. God’s covenant people are established with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4).
2. God’s covenant people are to trust His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).
3. God’s covenant people are to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-10).

Session in a Sentence
God established a covenant people as a vehicle to bless the entire world.

Christ Connection
God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus Christ is the promised descendant of Abraham through whom salvation flows to the rest of the world.

Missional Application
Because we have been made part of Abraham’s family of faith through Christ, we live as people through whom God’s blessings may flow to the world.
INSTRUCT: Prior to the group meeting, list on a board the four names below, and then ask group members what these four people had in common. Use their brief stories below to explain that these were “ordinary” people who overcame to do the extraordinary.

- No one expected much from him. After all, he couldn’t even speak fluently until he was nine years old, proving that he lacked perhaps even a normal mental capacity. His later expulsion from school and rejected admittance into polytechnic school only furthered his fate to be ordinary. But none of this stopped Albert Einstein from becoming one of the greatest scientists the world has ever seen on his way to winning the Nobel Prize.

- She was the quintessential struggling writer. During her lifetime, she penned over 1,800 letters and poems, but less than twelve were published. Surely this writer would drift away into obscurity. But today, Emily Dickinson is one of the more beloved writers in the literary world.

- At the age of 22, he was fired from the newspaper where he worked for “not being creative enough,” and then one of his first attempts to make it on his own failed, going bankrupt. Few, if anyone, would have expected Walt Disney to achieve any level of success, let alone winning thirty-two Academy Awards.

- As a college baseball player, this outfielder was considered to be an “extremely average” hitter by professional scouts, and the belief was that he would need to shift to the infield if he had any chance to make it. Few would have expected Tony Gwynn to lead the league in batting eight times, win five Gold Gloves in the outfield, and be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

READ the following paragraph in the DDG (p. 66).

There is something that draws us into stories of people who overcome all odds, even great failure, to defy all expectations and succeed. We like the idea of “ordinary” people doing the extraordinary. Perhaps because that is how most of us see ourselves, as an ordinary person longing to make a difference in the world.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question in their DDG (p. 66).

What stories of unexpected success encourage you? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SUMMARIZE: We can work hard and hope for a lucky break to make a difference, but perhaps there is another way, a way that is outside of ourselves. In this session we will see that God works in ways that are different from ours and that He is wise—He knows the best possible means to bring His plan to pass. Greatness is not about what we can do in ourselves but a matter of faith and obedience to the call and promises of God.
Point 1: God’s covenant people are established with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4).

SAY: The fall in the garden of Eden was among the darkest moments in the history of the world. But even then, God brought light and hope with the promise of an offspring who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Every generation after the exile from Eden waited in expectation for that child to be born, but one after another, each generation returned to the ground still waiting. And then the Lord spoke to Abram.


1 The LORD said to Abram: 
   Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. 4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.

SAY: These verses record the Abrahamic covenant—an everlasting covenant that God made with a man whom many believe was a worshiper of pagan gods when God first spoke to him.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to fill in the bullets in the DDG (p. 67), and then explain how God called Abram to leave three things so he might gain those three things in a greater degree.

God called on Abram to take a step of faith. Abram was to leave three things (v. 1):
- His land
- His relatives
- His father’s house

If Abram obeyed and stepped out in faith, God would do three things for him (vv. 2-3):
- Make him into a great nation
- Make his name great
- Bless him and make him a blessing to the world

Commentary: It might be difficult for us to appreciate the gravity of this calling. We live in a mobile society with much looser connections to family. But for Abram, this was a calling to leave everything he knew. His identity. His security. His life as he knew it. But God’s considerable calling did not come without considerable promises. If Abram trusted God, He would give Abram all that he was leaving but to a greater degree. Still, God was inviting Abram to leave what he had for what God promised to do in the future. And in that moment, Abram would have to decide whether or not he trusted this God whom he just met.
INTERACT: Ask your group the following question.

How should knowing the character of God impact our trust and obedience? (we can live the struggle of holy lives in Christ with full assurance of God’s eternal reward; when we fall in sin, we can come once again to our Father through Christ for forgiveness and strength to get up and walk again; obeying God’s call, no matter how difficult and uncomfortable, is the best and good thing for us)

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to look at the Bible passage and circle all of the “I will” phrases and draw a box around the one “you will” phrase.

EXPLAIN: God was establishing a unilateral covenant with Abram, one He would accomplish on behalf of Abram (“I will”) if only he would trust him and take the step of faithful obedience to go where He led him.

Commentary: As we consider what God called Abram to do that day, we should pause and consider how clear God was about the nature of the covenant relationship He was establishing. This was a unilateral covenant. Repeatedly God said, “I will.” Only once did He utter “you will” to Abram, and that was in the context of what God would do through the patriarch, not what he was to do for Him. This covenant would depend solely on God and was without condition. God was going to accomplish it. Giving Abram a new land, growing a nation, and blessing him was God’s project, not Abram’s. It would be strictly an act of grace, and that through faith.

READ the following paragraph in the DDG (p. 67).

God was determined to bless Abram through a covenant relationship, but the blessing God was promising to give Abram was not intended to end with him; it was a means to an end. Abram would benefit from God’s blessing, but he was to be a conduit of blessing, not its final recipient. God was going to bless Abram so he could, in turn, bless the whole world.

INTERACT: Ask the group to answer the following question if they feel comfortable doing so, but at least ask it for their consideration. Depending on your group dynamics, perhaps groups of 2-3 could share with one another.

Whom has God placed in your life for you to be His conduit of blessing? How can you be a blessing to this person? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)
Point 2: God’s covenant people are to trust His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).

PACK ITEM 8: ABRAHAM’S JOURNEY MAP: Use this map to show that Abram went as the Lord had told him. He initially left Ur with his father (Acts 7:2-3), and then he left his father’s house in Haran to travel on to Canaan. Abram reached and sojourned in this promised land. Furthermore, he had experienced God’s protection and His blessing in material wealth. But there was still one part of God’s covenant that he had yet to experience, and it was beginning to gnaw at him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 15:1-6 (DDG p. 68).

1 After these events, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great.

2 But Abram said, “Lord God, what can you give me, since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 Abram continued, “Look, you have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house will be my heir.”

4 Now the word of the Lord came to him: “This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir.” 5 He took him outside and said, “Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “Your offspring will be that numerous.”

6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

EXPLAIN briefly that “After these events” (v. 1) refers to Abram’s successful battle against some kings of the area to rescue his nephew Lot (Gen. 14). Then God spoke to Abram in a vision to remind him of His faithfulness and protection, but Abram responded with doubt because he had not yet been blessed with a son. So he resigned himself to having a slave in his home be his “heir.” (Refer to the first paragraph on DDG p. 68.)

God came to Abram saying his reward would be great. But instead of gratitude, Abram responded with doubt, perhaps even cynicism, because he had not yet been blessed with a son. So in an effort to help God out, Abram offered up a slave in his home to be his “heir.” How often we mistake God’s apparent inactivity for His inability.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following questions.

How have you tried to “help” God out? How did it turn out? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

READ the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 68).

God responded in mercy and grace to Abram’s doubt and resignation. No, Eliezer would not be Abram’s heir. God would give him a son from his own body. And then the Lord took Abram outside and invited him to count the stars.
EXPLAIN: As Abram gazed into the expanse of God’s creation and was reminded of the capabilities of his Creator, he believed God would do what He said He would do. God credited that belief to him as righteousness. And Abram’s faith has been the model for all believers since—salvation with God comes by grace through faith.

Commentary: In the New Testament, Paul, James, and the author of Hebrews pointed to the patriarch as the archetype of our faith in Christ (see Rom. 4; Gal. 3; Heb. 11:8-19; Jas. 2:14-26). When Abram placed one foot in front of the other in obedience to God’s calling in Genesis 12, he was demonstrating faith. In this moment under the starry night, he believed God could do the impossible, and on the basis of his faith in the word and promises of God, righteousness was credited to him.

In faith, Abram looked forward to the day of Christ (John 8:56-58), just as we are called to do. And like Abram, when we trust in the promises of God—the gospel—we are credited with Christ’s righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We come to God broken and unworthy, but by faith, He accepts us nonetheless as obedient and worthy because of Christ.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 68).

Voices from Church History
“What greater rebellion against God, what greater wickedness, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise? For what is this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful?”
—Martin Luther (1483-1546)

God Is Faithful: God’s faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises. We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.

Essential Doctrine “God Is Faithful”: God’s faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). God’s faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The apostle Paul linked the attribute of “faithful” to God’s coming through on His word: “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it” (1 Thess. 5:24). We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.
**Point 3:** God’s covenant people are to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-10).

**SAY:** Abram believed God, but his faith was far from perfect (as you will read about on Day 4 in your daily devotions). But twenty-four years after God’s initial call to Abram in Genesis 12, God appeared to him again.

**READ** Genesis 17:1-10 (DDG p. 69).

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the **Lord** appeared to him, saying, “I am God Almighty. Live in my presence and be blameless. 2 I will set up my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you greatly.”

3 Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: 4 “As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. 5 Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. 6 I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you. 7 I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. 8 And to you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God.”

9 God also said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep my covenant. 10 This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised.

**EXPLAIN** the trajectory of salvation: *justification* followed by *sanctification*. And show how Abram, now Abraham, demonstrated God’s sanctifying work in his life in the way he responded to God’s appearance. (Refer to the first paragraph on DDG p. 69.)

**Commentary:** When God calls a person, He calls them to Himself as they are, and through faith in Him, He gives His people a new identity. God declares them no longer marked by their sin and disobedience but by His righteousness. This is called **justification**. But God is not content to leave His people where they are. So through the work of Holy Spirit and the purposeful experiences of life, God grows His people and molds them into His image so they will live out their new identity rather than their old identity. This process is called **sanctification**, where we are sanctified—or made holy—to live more of the way God intends each day. As godliness increases, worldliness decreases.

**Example:** When God reminded Abram of His promise to multiply him (v. 2), he did not balk as he had before. Instead, he fell on his face in God’s presence (v. 3). Whining had given way to worship.

God had been changing Abram and growing his faith over the years, a process called **sanctification**. The result was a deeper faith and growing obedience. God marked Abram’s changing life with a name change. No longer Abram, now he would be Abraham, “father of a multitude.”
INSTRUCT: Ask group members to evaluate their own desire to obey God in faith with the scale in their DDG (p. 69).

Where would you put your desire to obey God in faith on this scale?

No Desire  O  O  O  O  O  O  O  O  O  O  With Total Abandon

SAY: Hopefully we all see growth in our faith and obedience, yet there can be times when we take steps backward. Regardless of where you see yourself on this scale, we must continually remind ourselves that our righteousness before God comes simply through faith in Jesus Christ, but God is not content to leave us where we are. He grows His people, and our salvation and sanctification serve a purpose beyond ourselves.

EXPLAIN: God’s covenant promises are given to a people He changes for a purpose. This was true of Abraham and is true of us as well. God changes and blesses us so we can be a blessing to the world in the name of Jesus. (Refer to the second paragraph on DDG p. 69.)

As we read of God changing Abraham, we cannot lose sight of the bigger picture. God was changing and blessing Abraham so that he might become a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:3). Like Abraham, God’s plan is to bring blessing to others through His blessings to us.

Commentary: Notice the subtle change in what God said to Abraham before and after his name change to remind him, and us, of God’s purpose in salvation and sanctification. In verses 1-6, God spoke of the covenant as being between Him and Abraham. But following the name change, God spoke of the covenant that was between Him, Abraham, and his future offspring. God mentioned Abraham’s future offspring five times in verses 7-10. Twice He mentioned that this covenant was permanent (vv. 7,8). This was God’s way of reminding Abraham that he was part of something that didn’t end with him. He was part of a bigger plan, an ongoing plan, a plan to provide redemption to the world.

When we are ignorant of God’s greater purpose in our lives—that He has changed us to be on mission with Him by living out and sharing the gospel—we are in danger of misinterpreting the what, when, and how of God’s actions for us. God’s bigger plan gives context to what He does in our lives each day. Without it, we will not understand what is going on, which is the kindling of doubt and distrust in our hearts.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How does God’s plan to use you as part of His story of redemption help you understand what He is doing in your life right now? (the trials, struggles, and events in my life today are shaping me to be more like Christ and to speak the gospel in the lives of others)
My Mission

**EXPLAIN:** The story of Abraham reminds us of God’s unending faithfulness, grace, and mercy to take the morally deplorable and make them shining examples of faith. We need to take this message to heart, because we are the fruit of God’s work through such faithfulness. God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his descendants—namely, through Jesus. It was through Christ that salvation flowed to the rest of the world, including us. And just like Abraham, we are not the final destination of God’s blessings. We too are to be conduits of His blessings to the rest of the world as we live out our purpose as instruments of reconciliation.

**READ** the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 70), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have been made part of Abraham’s family of faith through Christ, we live as people through whom God’s blessings may flow to the world.

- **What promises of God do you need to believe in because you know God is faithful?**
- **Who are some people in your community that your group can seek to bless on an ongoing basis?**
- **What are some ways you can share with others the blessings of faith in Christ this week?**

**CLOSE IN PRAYER:** Father, You are amazing in Your faithfulness and grace toward Your children. Though we stumble and fall, You continue to call us to Yourself, forgiving us and blessing us once again. For Your glory and the praise of our Savior, Jesus Christ, make us bold ambassadors of the gospel of Christ in both our words and our deeds. Amen.

**INSTRUCT:** As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 71-73), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 74) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 71-73) help group members get into God’s Word for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 74) helps group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 71-73) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.

- Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 3 as a part of point 2 in the session: God is not looking for our help; He is looking for our humility. He wants us to wait on Him, in faith, knowing that He is good and believing in His promises.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- Day 4: “We need to take care to consider whom we might bless by our obedience and whom we might hurt by our disobedience.”

- Day 5: “It’s one thing to praise God for what He has done; it’s something else to trust Him for what He has yet to do.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the DDG (p. 74) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

- Encourage group members to bless one another as they gather to spur each other on in faith and good works throughout the week in their small groups.

- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: God’s covenant people are established with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-4).

“Did God call Abram from Ur or from Haran to leave Mesopotamia for Canaan? According to 11:31, it was Abram’s father Terah who decided to take his family from Ur in Mesopotamia to Canaan, though we are not told why. The context of verses 1-3 suggests that Abram was in Haran when God summoned him to Canaan. According to Stephen in Acts 7:2 God appeared to Abram in Mesopotamia ‘before he settled in Haran’ and called him to leave for a new land. If God had spoken to Abram while Abram was in Ur, this could have been part of Terah’s motive for moving his family. God could then have repeated His summons to Abram to proceed to Canaan after his father had died in Haran (Gen. 11:32).”

“Wherever the call was issued, its substance was the same: he was to leave and to go. He was to leave three things—his country, his people, and his father’s household (12:1b). These are the very things that give anyone a sense of security but Abram is told to leave them. He is not told specifically where he is to go, but is told that his destination will be his inheritance from the Lord. He need have no fear or anxiety about where he will end up, for the Lord’s presence will be there for him.”

“The question of the basis of Abram’s faith begs to be asked, though unfortunately the answer is not apparent. What originally turned his thoughts to Yahweh when his father Terah was a worshiper of other gods and most certainly reared his sons in the midst of idol worship? Joshua stated quite clearly to the people of Israel, ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah, the father of Abram and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods’ (Josh. 24:2). Furthermore Terah gave his son the name Ab-ram ‘my father is Ram.’ Why Abram turned from the gods his father worshiped to worship Yahweh is still a mystery. Yet the text clearly notes that when God called Abram out of Ur, Abram turned without hesitation to the true God and followed Him.”

Point 2: God’s covenant people are to trust His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).

“After these things links this episode to the one immediately preceding. In ch. 14 Abram rejected the offer from the king of Sodom for the victory spoils as a reward. In response, God now states that Abram’s reward shall be very great. By rejecting the use of human wealth to achieve greatness (14:22-24), Abram demonstrates his willingness to wait for God to provide. in a vision. Although it is not certain, the initial vision may have taken place at night. In 15:5 God brings Abram out of his tent to count the stars.”
“Old and childless, Abram believed the Lord; that is, he affirmed that God is dependable. God credited it to him as righteousness, that is, he judged or accounted that Abram measured up to the standard, conformed to the norm. Abram’s faith and God’s gracious response to it served as a paradigm of the Christian experience in three different NT books (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23).”

**Point 3: God’s covenant people are to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-10).**

“Thirteen long years passed before the Lord again appeared to Abram (17:1). By this time Abram was ninety-nine and Sarah was ninety. There no longer seemed to be any possibility that they might have a child together. But the Lord encouraged Abram to continue to trust his promise. The Lord began by reminding Abram that he was God Almighty, in Hebrew, El Shaddai, a name that has not been used in Genesis before. The Lord then commanded Abram to remain loyal to him and wholeheartedly faithful to the revelation he had received so far (17:2). Abram responded to God’s presence by falling facedown in worship (17:3).”

“Abram’s gripping response of falling facedown expressed his awe at the theophany (vv. 3a,17). This is the demeanor of respect toward a superior (e.g., 37:10; 42:6; 44:14; 48:12; 2 Sam. 9:6; 1 Kings 18:7); also it is the action accompanying profound pleading before the Lord in a moment of crisis (e.g., Num. 16:4,22; Josh. 7:6; cp. the reaction of Moses to theophany, Ex. 34:8). Such reaction in the presence of the Lord is recorded only of Abram and his servant (24:52) among the patriarchs (cp. the greeting, 18:2; 19:1).”

“The Lord promises that this covenant will last for ever: I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you (17:7). On one level, this promise applies to Abraham’s offspring in the flesh, but at a higher level it applies to his spiritual children (Rom. 4:16).”

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**References**

A Word from the Editor

Trevin Wax
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AUTHOR OF MULTIPLE BOOKS, INCLUDING
This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in Light of the Gospel

For a story to be great, it must include a great beginning. The story of the Bible, which tells the true story of our world, is no exception.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God the Creator in all His majesty and goodness as He spins the world into motion and lavishes His image bearers with love. We have an “inciting incident” that introduces conflict into this good world, as the first humans raise their fists in defiance toward their loving Father and bring havoc into this peaceful paradise. But even here, we have a promise—God will make things right again. God will cover His people’s sins and crush their adversary. The rest of Genesis shows how even though sin spread throughout the world, God remained faithful to His promise to Eve, His promise to Noah, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Book of Genesis is a glorious and earthy tale of rebellion and redemption, of sin and salvation, of failings and faith. Here is a book that shows us who we are in our sin and who God is in His grace. May this study lead you to express gratitude for God’s love toward you and then extend His love to everyone who inhabits this world He has promised to restore.