Unit 2, Session 4

God Renews His Promise

Summary and Goal
In previous sessions we saw that God’s plan of providing forgiveness of sin would come through a people of promise—a covenant people. God made that covenant with Abram (Gen. 12:1-3), and later He renewed that covenant with Abraham’s son, Isaac. We will see in this session that God keeps His promises, but at times He does so in ways we would least expect, which can cause us to question God. But we will also see how God keeps His promises through unexpected people, many of whom seem quite unworthy of such a privilege.

Session Outline
1. God’s promises are kept in unusual ways (Gen. 25:21-26).
2. God’s promises are given to unworthy people (Gen. 25:29-34).
3. God’s promises are based on His unchanging faithfulness (Gen. 26:1-6).

Session in a Sentence
God’s covenant promises are based on His faithfulness, not ours.

Christ Connection
God’s covenant promise to bless the world was fully realized when Jesus was born in unusual circumstances and lived and died to save unworthy people from our sin.

Misssional Application
Because we are imperfect and unworthy people whom God uses to accomplish His purposes, we boldly share and show the love of Christ with all others, inviting them into God’s kingdom through Jesus.
SAY: Recount the following story about the invention of the Post-it® Note.

Spencer Silver had a job to do. A 3M® scientist, Silver was working to develop a better, stronger adhesive than anything on the market. In the process, he created an adhesive that stuck to surfaces but did not bond tightly to them. In terms of the task given to him by his company, it was an absolute failure; the exact opposite of what he was working to develop.

But Silver wasn’t willing to give up on his discovery altogether. It may not have been what 3M® was looking for, but the scientist believed it had potential—there had to be a use for it. He shared it with all of his colleagues, but no one could figure out how to use this temporary adhesive.

At that same time, another 3M® scientist named Art Fry had a problem. During his weekly practices with his church choir, Fry would mark the hymns they would sing with small scraps of paper. The problem was that they wouldn’t stay in the hymn book but would often fall out during the week.

And then it struck him. Fry contacted Silver and the pair began developing a new product, something that would soon become far more than merely a bookmark. Using scrap Canary Yellow paper from the lab next door and Silver’s adhesive, Post-it® Notes were born. Today, there are over four thousand Post-it® products.

READ: Use the following paragraph in the DDG (p. 93) to transition from this story to the idea of God doing unexpected things in our lives.

Did you know that the invention of Post-it® Notes was completely unexpected, a discovery on the journey for a different solution? We have all experienced times when things have not gone as we might have expected, whether for better or worse. The question for us as followers of Christ is how do we make sense of those times? What do we do when God seems to throw us a curveball?

INTERACT: Ask the group the following questions in the DDG (p. 93).

When has something not gone as you have expected? How did that impact your relationship with God? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

SUMMARIZE: In this session, we will see that God keeps His promises, but at times He does so in ways we would least expect, which can cause us to question God. But we will also see how God keeps His promises through unexpected people, many of whom seem quite unworthy of such a privilege—people like us.
**Point 1: God’s promises are kept in unusual ways (Gen. 25:21-26).**

*READ* Genesis 25:21-26 (DDG p. 94).

21 Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife because she was childless. The LORD was receptive to his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 But the children inside her struggled with each other, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her:

Two nations are in your womb; two peoples will come from you and be separated.

One people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.

24 When her time came to give birth, there were indeed twins in her womb. 25 The first one came out red-looking, covered with hair like a fur coat, and they named him Esau. 26 After this, his brother came out grasping Esau’s heel with his hand. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

*SAY:* Abraham had struggled to trust in God’s promises because of his wife’s infertility, but God had proven Himself faithful. Now Isaac and his wife faced their own unexpected, heartbreaking trial. But unlike his father, Isaac did not take matters into his own hands. Instead, he turned to God in prayer and left the outcome in the Lord’s hands.

*EXPLAIN* the emotional and theological implications of Rebekah’s infertility.

- **Emotional:** The struggle with fertility issues is stressful and difficult for a husband and wife both individually and as a couple. Though Scripture here seems to pass over the issue of infertility quickly, Rebekah was barren for twenty years after marrying Isaac (see Gen. 25:20,26)—twenty years likely filled with heartache, confusion, doubt, and perhaps even anger.

- **Theological:** If Rebekah could not have children, then the line of Abraham would be broken. Isaac was the son of promise; *his* son would be the next one in that line for the covenant to keep going forward. Without a son through Isaac and Rebekah, how could God fulfill His promises to bless the world?

*READ* the following paragraph in the DDG (p. 94).

In His grace and faithfulness, the Lord heard Isaac’s prayer, and Rebekah conceived. But Rebekah’s long-desired pregnancy, which surely caused great joy, thankfulness, and celebration, took an unexpected turn. The twins growing inside of her began to struggle, causing her to seek the Lord. Once again, God heard and responded. And in yet another unexpected turn in this story, God told Rebekah that her firstborn son would serve the younger.
EXPLAIN: the two ways God was working unexpectedly in this situation, demonstrating His supernatural work to bring redemption to humanity.

- The first two patriarchs in the line of God’s covenant promises were powerless to have a single son, let alone form a nation of people or provide salvation for sinners. So Rebekah’s barrenness giving way to a miraculous pregnancy, just as with Sarah, reminds us that God was clearly the One fulfilling His promises and working toward salvation for humankind. The Messiah promised by God would indeed come through the line of Abraham, but not through the efforts or merits of Abraham, Isaac, or anyone else. God alone would accomplish this.

- When God revealed to Rebekah that the older would serve the younger with respect to her twin sons, He showed that He is unafraid to counter our cultural expectations for the purpose of His redemptive plan of salvation. Throughout Scripture we can see other examples of God doing what was startling and even unacceptable from a human lens. Moses, the leader of Israel and spokesman for God, was a man who did not speak well. The prophet Hosea was commanded to take an unfaithful wife. Jesus reached out His hand to touch those with leprosy and shared meals with sinners. Time and time again we see God’s promises not working around the obstacles and violations of social norms but through them.

INTERACT: Read the “Voices from Church History” quote; then ask groups of 3-4 to discuss the following question (DDG p. 94).

Voices from Church History

“Beloved, how blessed and marvelous are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendor in righteousness, truth in boldness, faith in confidence, self-control in holiness; and all these things fall within our understanding. What things are being prepared for those who endure? The Creator and Father of the ages, the All-holy himself, knows their greatness and beauty. Let us then strive to be among those who endure so that we may share in the promised gifts.”

—Clement of Rome (c. 30-100)
Point 2: God’s promises are given to unworthy people (Gen. 25:29-34).

READ Genesis 25:29-34 (DDG p. 95).

29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field exhausted. 30 He said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, because I’m exhausted.” That is why he was also named Edom. 31 Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” 32 “Look,” said Esau, “I’m about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?” 33 Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to Jacob and sold his birthright to him. 34 Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau; he ate, drank, got up, and went away. So Esau despised his birthright.

SAY: As Esau and Jacob grew older, they became very different from each other. Esau became a great hunter, whereas Jacob preferred the quiet life of home. But on this day, the exhausted hunter became the hunted prey of his calculating brother when Jacob manipulated Esau’s impulsiveness for his own purposes.

EXPLAIN Esau’s impulsive nature to sell his birthright and Jacob’s cold, calculating efforts to secure the family birthright for himself.

- Esau was a sensually minded man. He lived for the moment and sought to satisfy his most basic, primal needs, having no appetite for spiritual things. He had such little regard for the things of God that he was willing to give up a most rare and precious gift—the heritage of Abraham through the promises of God—for a bowl of stew.
- Jacob wanted to obtain his family’s spiritual birthright for himself, perhaps having heard the Lord’s prophecy given to Rebekah about the older serving the younger. But even if Jacob’s goal seemed nobler than his brother’s, the method he used was anything but noble as he manipulated his brother in his weakened state.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the table in their DDG (p. 95), with the exception of the last row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Esau</th>
<th>Jacob</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firstborn Son, Older Brother</td>
<td>Second Son, Younger Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Hunter, Outdoorsman</td>
<td>Quiet Man, Preferred Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favored by Isaac</td>
<td>Favored by Rebekah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive, Unspiritual</td>
<td>Calculating, Deceptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unworthy Sinner</td>
<td>Unworthy Sinner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXPLAIN: Both Esau and Jacob showed themselves to be people unworthy of the promises God made to Abraham, and yet, God still worked through this family to accomplish His plan.

Commentary: The author of Hebrews used Esau as an example of how not to live in this world, especially as a Christian: “And make sure that there isn’t any immoral or irreverent person like Esau, who sold his birthright in exchange for a single meal. For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, even though he sought it with tears, because he didn’t find any opportunity for repentance” (Heb. 12:16-17). With his immoral mind, Esau rationalized that exchanging his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew was a good trade. And so, he despised his birthright as the firstborn of Isaac’s sons.

Regarding Jacob, the Scriptures do not overtly condemn Jacob’s actions here, but neither do they offer approval. The future tension and conflict between the brothers, however, provides an implicit reminder that God’s promises were not to be obtained this way. For just like his grandfather Abraham before him, Jacob took matters into his own hands instead of trusting in God to fulfill His promises, and the result would be just as costly.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide the answer—Unworthy Sinner—for both blanks on the last row of the table in the DDG (p. 95).

READ: Use the following paragraphs in the DDG (p. 95) to say that we should learn not to follow in the sinful actions of Esau and Jacob, but we should also recognize that we are no better than them—we too are people unworthy of God’s promises but for God’s grace and redemption in Christ.

Esau was not worthy of the promises of God, but neither was Jacob. The elder son of Isaac had no regard for spiritual things; the younger son used manipulation to wrestle the birthright, and later the blessing, from his brother. Yet God still worked through this family to bring about the promises He had made to Abraham.

We too are unworthy to be recipients of God’s love, grace, and mercy. We too are unworthy to be used by God as a light in the midst of sin’s darkness. We fail to value spiritual blessings; we give ourselves over to chasing after fleshly things in sinful ways; and we operate from a worldly mind-set rather than a spiritual one. Yet the Scriptures tell us that God can still work His redemption in and through unworthy people like us.

INSTRUCT: Ask the group the following question.

? How should the faithful, ongoing work of God even through unworthy sinners challenge our fears and excuses against obeying God in faith? (God is more than adequate to make up for our shortcomings, so we can trust Him to help us obey; we really have no excuse for obeying God in faith because He overcomes them all by nature of who He is; success in the Christian life is not a matter of perfection but of humble, repentant faith working itself out in our words and lives as a testimony to the world of our Savior, Jesus Christ)
Point 3: God’s promises are based on His unchanging faithfulness (Gen. 26:1-6).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 26:1-6 (DDG p. 96).

1 There was another famine in the land in addition to the one that had occurred in Abraham’s time. And Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, at Gerar. 2 The Lord appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt. Live in the land that I tell you about; 3 stay in this land as an alien, and I will be with you and bless you. For I will give all these lands to you and your offspring, and I will confirm the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. 4 I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky, I will give your offspring all these lands, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring, 5 because Abraham listened to me and kept my mandate, my commands, my statutes, and my instructions.” 6 So Isaac settled in Gerar.

EXPLAIN how God’s restatement of the covenant with Isaac reflects the covenant God made with Abraham.

• Command to Obey: God told Abraham to go to a land He would show him (12:1); God told Isaac to stay in the land (26:2-3). Abraham went, and Isaac stayed.

• God’s Promises: God promised Isaac land for his descendants (26:3; see 17:8). God promised offspring as numerous as the stars (26:4; see 15:5). And God promised that all the nations on earth would be blessed by his offspring (26:4; see 12:2-3).

READ the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 96).

God was committed to His promises, but how could He be? Abraham and Isaac failed to obey God completely and their faith in God wavered at times. We only question because we focus on the wrong person. Our gaze should not rest on Abraham or Isaac and their flaws but should be fixed on God, who swore an oath to Abraham. This God is full of truth, goodness, kindness, and faithfulness, and He is unchanging.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 96).

God Is Unchanging: God’s unchanging nature is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find assurance and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness will carry them through into eternity.
Essential Doctrine “God Is Unchanging”: God’s being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God’s unchanging nature is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find assurance and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into eternity.

INTERACT: Ask the group the following question.

**Why do you think it is important that God’s own faithfulness, and not ours, secures His promises and grace?** (It means that God can show love and grace to His image bearers even when they don’t deserve it; God alone receives the glory for His blessings to and through us; our faithfulness could never match up, so we would only receive judgment and never blessing)

READ the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 96) to show that God’s unchanging faithfulness to and through Abraham and his descendants led to the coming of Christ for our salvation.

Though Abraham was an unworthy sinner, he did believe God’s promises, so he listened and obeyed. The unchanging, faithful God used Abraham, and now He extends that same grace to us. God does not save us or use us for His redemptive purposes because we are worthy but because Jesus Christ is. God promised Abraham and Isaac to bless the world through their offspring—it was Jesus who died on the cross to take away the sin of the world. And now those who have Abraham’s faith, who trust in Jesus, obey God’s commands and joyfully spread the gospel around the world.

PACK ITEM 12: THE HEART OF CHRIST: Call attention to this poster with a quote from John Bunyan, and ask the following question from the DDG (p. 96).

**How should we respond to the truths that we are unworthy sinners, God is faithful to His promises, and Christ died for our sins?** (we should be grateful for the undeserved salvation graciously given to us; should know that God’s love and faithfulness are steadfast and stronger than our sin; should joyfully share the gospel)
**SUMMARIZE:** God extends His promises to us not because of our abilities to follow, love, and obey Him completely. Instead, He extends His promises to us based on His character and for His glory. All of God’s promises point us to the ultimate promise He has kept—providing the rescuer, Jesus, who died on a cross to pay the penalty of our sin and rose from the dead to defeat sin and death forever. God is faithful, and our response to the beauty of God’s unchanging faithfulness should involve humility, gratitude, and awe. When we listen to God and obey Him, God uses us to bless those around us. May our obedience be a blessing for generations to come.

**READ** the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 97), 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 are imperfect and unworthy people whom God uses to accomplish His purposes, we boldly share and show the love of Christ with all others, inviting them into God’s kingdom through Jesus.

- As an unworthy sinner, how will you honor the covenant-keeping God who sent His Son to die for our sins?
- What are some steps we can take to help one another confess sin and fight against it?
- Where and with whom will you share about God’s faithfulness, graciousness, and love in Christ?

**CLOSE IN PRAYER:** Father, Your faithfulness and grace shine through Your Word and humble us because though we are unworthy, You fulfill all Your promises. Supremely, You have given us Your Son to rescue us from our sin by faith, and You have given us Your Spirit to mold us into usable vessels for Your glory. So strengthen us that we may boldly proclaim to the world the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus. Amen.

**INSTRUCT:** As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 98-100), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 101) 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. 98-100) help group members get into God’s Word for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 101) helps group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

**Daily Study**

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 98-100) 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 3 in the session: *The shared patterns between Abraham and Isaac show us how one generation influences the next—for better or worse. Like Abraham, we all leave a spiritual legacy behind us. The question is what will its quality be?*

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 2**: “We need to remember that all of Scripture is inspired by God and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16).”
- **Day 4**: “Like Abraham, Isaac was not the answer humanity needed; he was a sinful man in need of a Savior himself.”

Visit [www.GospelProject.com/blog](http://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. 101) 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 help one another remember and reflect the unchanging faithfulness of God to unworthy sinners.**
- 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 promises are kept in unusual ways (Gen. 25:21-26).

“Inquire of the Lord meant that Rebekah consulted a prophet or a priest, but it may be that Isaac functioned in this way. Esau was prophesied to be an ancestor of a nation, the Edomites, who would generally be ruled by Israel, the nation descended from Jacob. According to Malachi 1:2-3, quoted in Romans 9:13, the prophecy also meant that God chose Jacob to inherit the Abrahamic promise.”

“The observation that the children struggled together within her (v. 22) introduces one of the main themes of chs. 25–36. The relationship between the twin boys will be largely hostile. Conflict between brothers is a recurring motif in Genesis, beginning with Cain and Abel, and is a constant reminder of the negative impact of the fall on human existence. Yet the divine revelation that the older shall serve the younger (25:23) prepares the reader to expect that Jacob will have a significant role to play in the development of the unique family line in Genesis. Normally, younger brothers were subservient to the firstborn male, who enjoyed special privileges associated with the concept of primogeniture.”

**Point 2:** God’s promises are given to unworthy people (Gen. 25:29-34).

“Though the NT stressed God’s free choice of Jacob over Esau (see Rom. 9:10-13), this incident highlights the other side of the story—human responsibility. It cannot be denied that Esau despised his birthright (25:34b; Heb. 12:16-17). There is a tension between God’s choice of Jacob and Esau’s responsibility for freely selling his birthright. In the same way, God’s grace draws us to Jesus for salvation (John 6:44), but at the same time, it remains our duty to believe (John 3:16). We must not think that God needed this sort of conflict in Isaac and Rebekah’s home in order to accomplish his plans (25:23). He does not lead us into sin to achieve his ends. God would have fulfilled his plan whatever the condition of Isaac’s home. Whether the family was united or divided made no difference to him, because he is all-powerful and sovereign.”

“Let’s not rush too quickly over the interesting parenthesis at the end of verse 30. The name Edom means ‘red.’ Apparently it became a nickname for Esau related not to his redness at birth (v. 25) but to his fatal choice of the red stew. How interesting that the skillful hunter came back from the woods this time with no game as chef Jacob literally boiled vegetable soup. The hunter became the hunted, trapped by the bait of his brother’s menu. The result was catastrophic.”
“The conflict between the brothers began to escalate on an occasion when Esau’s hunger got the better of him, and he sold his birthright to his brother. The seriousness of this transaction must not be underestimated. This transaction was carried out legally, not under duress, and it was established by an oath. The oath legally and permanently fixed the transfer of the birthright, which then legitimately belonged to Jacob. The birthright not only guaranteed the greater inheritance but also the headship of the family clan. In this case it included the right to invoke ‘the blessing of Abraham’ (see 28:4) and thus to receive the promises of the covenant (see 12:1-3; 17:6-8). The Nuzi Tablets (c. 1450 BC) from modern Iraq did allow the birthright to be sold or changed from one child to another by the father. However, Esau so despised his birthright that he bypassed his father because of his desire for instant gratification and sold the birthright himself.”

**Point 3: God’s promises are based on His unchanging faithfulness (Gen. 26:1-6).**

“The words ‘famine’ and ‘Abimelech’ bring to mind the patriarch’s sojourns in Egypt (12:10–13:1) and in Gerar (20:1-18). Verse 1 essentially repeats the narrative structure of 12:10a, departing only by referencing Abraham’s experience. The term ‘famine’ … occurs first in 12:10(2x) and not again until here. The author identifies this famine in terms of the ‘earlier famine’ in his father’s day. The author makes the point that for better or worse Isaac is following in his father’s footsteps. The common route to Egypt took a traveler through the Philistine plain (Ex. 13:17), where in our passage the Lord intercepts the emigrant at Gerar.”

“The reasons for repeating the promise to Isaac are probably twofold. First, Isaac needed to have the experience of receiving the promise directly from God in a personal encounter. Secondly, Isaac needed to be reminded that he was able to inherit the promises because Abraham had obeyed the Lord. Therefore he, too, was expected to keep his part of the covenant and to obey the Lord so that his descendants would also enjoy the Lord’s blessings (26:5; see 17:1-2). Isaac obeyed God and did not go to Egypt (26:6).”

**References**

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.