

## Covenant

Genesis 15:6, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

**Question:** How can I become a part of what God is doing in this world?

**Key Verses:** Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-25; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23

Jesus of Nazareth is the most influential figure of human history without peer. There is, however, one man who more people look to as the Father of their Faith. He was an ancient titan named Abram, meaning “exalted Father.” His name would later change to Abraham, “Father of multitudes” after Yahweh pledged to grant him offspring as abundant as sand on the sea-shore. Lo and behold, God pulled it off. Abraham became the Father of both Judaism and Islam. By extension, he is also the father of the Christian faith. To put that in perspective, 34% of the world claims to be Christian, another 25% Muslim, and .25% Jewish. Together adherents to Abraham account for 60% of humanity!

As Genesis 15:6 says, “Abram believed the LORD, and *he credited it to him as righteousness.*” This mantra became the choral refrain of his biography (see Psalm 106:31; Rom 4:1-25; Gal 3:6; James 2:3). As Paul asserts, Abraham is a model for every future follower of Yahweh. A short synopsis of his story shows why. God called him from ancient Iraq to leave his family and his land. Because Abram trusted God, he left Mesopotamia and emigrated to Israel, following nothing but the next clue God gave about his future. And there wasn’t much to go on. Abram in his nineties had no biological offspring nor a single meter of real estate. Yet God promised to establish a kingdom through Abraham’s descendants. By faith, certainly not by sight, Abraham believed God would be true to his word. Eventually, and against all odds, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham whose single son, had a couple of kids who had a gaggle that became a horde.

His narrative is as compelling as it is interesting. Through the center of the story is a golden strand—a promise. That’s important today because we lay hold of the other end of that golden strand when we latch onto Jesus’ promises by faith. The promise, in biblical vernacular is called a covenant, a legally binding relationship with Abraham. It sounds a bit less intimate when phrased like that but trust me, it is deeper and more meaningful because it can be scaled globally beyond personal affinity. This concept of covenant (or contract) undergirds virtually every relationship God ever had with any human. It is essential to understand if you, personally, intend to have a working relationship with God. Our faith in Jesus, our connection to the Holy Spirit, our belonging in the body of Christ is all predicated on a covenant relationship.

Here’s how it works and how it has always worked with God. A covenant (also called a testament), is basically an agreement between two parties. The ancients called this kind of contract a Suzerain Treaty. The rules were simple. (1) The greater of the two parties established the conditions which are unalterable by the lesser party (that’s you and me in case you had a

question). (2) These conditions established the blessings if the contract was kept and the curses if the contract was broken. That’s pretty much it. One might add (3) the covenant is typically ratified by a blood sacrifice. The ancients used to cut an animal in half (especially goats, bulls, sheep, and birds) so that each party could walk together between the dissected carcass. That is precisely what God did with Abraham in Genesis 15:7-21. It was a symbol of solidarity when each party pledged to be loyal to the contract lest the fate of the animal become the fate of the one who broke fidelity. It had a bit more bite than a handshake.

There are six major covenants in the Bible. Of course the two major ones with Moses and Jesus are used as the great divide: Old Testament and New Testament. Here are all six:

<b>Covenant</b>	<b>Condition(s)</b>	<b>Blessings</b>	<b>Curses</b>	<b>Blood</b>
Adam	Abstain from one tree	Fellowship with God	Death and exile	Animal Skin, Gen 3:21
Noah	Build an ark	Survival	Annihilation	Eating Meat, Gen 9:4
Abram	Circumcision	Offspring and Land	Cut off	Circumcision, Gen 17:11
Moses	10 Commandments	Land and Kingdom	Exile	Passover, Exod 12:27
David	Temple Worship	Throne in Israel	Divided Kingdom	Sacrifices, 2 Sam 7:13
Christ	Eucharist	Eternal Life	Damnation	Cross, Luke 22:20

Obviously, many more details could be added but this is a sufficient summary. With this template in mind, let’s look specifically at Abraham’s covenant. This will help us mental map our own covenant in Christ. God promised to make of Abraham a great nation. Genesis 12:2–3, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Look again at the last sentence. It assures Abraham’s offspring would have a global impact. The question is “how?”. How would Abraham’s descendants bless the nations of the world? Most of the Jewish Rabbis understood that to mean that the nations that adopted Israel, who came to her and repented, would be blessed because of their conversion. It was an inward focused perspective of religion—you come to Israel, become Israel, and would be blessed with Israel. There were some rabbis, however, Jesus among them, who understood the promise of Abraham to be an outward focused commission. Outsiders don’t come to us but we go to them. The earth would be blessed precisely because we leave our homes and families to go where God lead and to say what God said. This act of extending the fame of our God would result in the inclusion of all cultures not the protection of a single culture. The best Old Testament example of this is Jonah. He clearly adopted the inward focus. The book clearly demonstrates the outward focus. It is no oversimplification to say that the covenant people of God have always fallen into one of these two camps: Jonah the man vs. Jonah the book. The issue is not *whether* God would bless the world through Abraham, but *how?*

After all, the promises of God are irrevocable. Romans 11:29, “For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” This is why Ishmael secured a heritage similar to Isaac’s. Both proceeded from the loins of Abraham, the fount of God’s blessings. Abraham tried to force the fulfillment of God’s promised offspring by procreating with Hagar, his wife’s maidservant. Even though the Messiah would not flow through that lineage, the blessing of God did. Genesis 17:20–21 says, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.” This brings up an important point: The covenant promises will be fulfilled. When we do it God’s way, good things happen. When we try to impose our will on God’s or short circuit his plans because we lack faith, some devastating and permanent consequences can ensue. In case you are unaware, the descendants of Ishmael are the very people most opposed to Jesus the Messiah—the Islamic states of the Middle East. Abraham’s single act of unbelief had permanent consequences we contend with yet today.

Why does all this matter? In practical terms there are three major implications. First, *we are in a covenant relationship with God*. This implies both responsibility and community. Often we think about our journey with Jesus as an individual endeavor, almost a personal romance. God loves me and I reciprocate. While there are important truths in that image, it is a fractional truth. God calls us to be part of a nation, a heritage, a people. We call it a church, but it’s bigger than that. We are members of a global enterprise, a kingdom, if you will, that spans every time zone and all eras. We have a living link going back to Father Abraham whom we follow as an example of faith. There is more “we” than “me” in our adventure with Jesus. When we lose sight of the covenant we can easily deteriorate our discipleship into rules I keep for God rather than responsibilities I fulfill for the good of my brothers. It is NOT you and God against the world. It is God and his covenant people FOR the world.

Second, that covenant involves blood. The night before Jesus died, he connected the covenant of Moses with the new covenant. He didn’t obliterate the old covenant, he fulfilled it. The Passover Lamb was a foreshadowing of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In Matthew 26:27–28, around a private table, Jesus established an enduring memorial: “Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is *my blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” The blood drawn by circumcision marked Abraham’s offspring. The blood of the Passover Lamb marked the door posts of each Israelite family. The blood of Jesus marks Christians with the signet seal of the Spirit. With each successive covenant, the sacrifice got greater, the rewards richer, and the stakes higher.

Third, the condition of the covenant is faith. Faith is covenant loyalty. Typically, the word “faith” implies a kind of disembodied mental ascent—your beliefs. Faith is portrayed in popular media as an unsubstantiated emotional commitment to something that cannot be

proved. According to the great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, faith is a leap in the dark. That definition seems to have stuck in American pop-culture. Our culture portrays faith as blind belief. According the Bible, however, faith is not a leap in the dark but a walk in the light. The power of Abraham is that he moved ahead where he couldn't see ahead because of what he had already seen behind him. Because God had demonstrated his fidelity, Abram gave him is loyalty. Therein lies the power of his example for us today. Faith is doing what you don't understand because of what you already know to be true. Faith is not sight but it is certainly far from blind. When we prioritize the unexplainable over the undeniable we will struggle with faith. When we stand first on the undeniable then the unexplainable becomes less of a barrier to our obedience.

Here is a simple exercise that could transform your vision and practice of faith. Every time you read the word "faith" or "belief" in the Bible, replace it with the word "faithful". This will make more sense almost every time. For example, let's go back to our core text of this lesson: Genesis 15:6, "*Abram was faithful to the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*" Think in terms of a husband and wife (another covenant relationship). If a husband says "I have faith in my wife." It is a compliment. If he says, "I am faithful to my wife" it is a commitment. Likewise, God is far less concerned with what you can intellectually muster to believe than what you can manage by fidelity. Abraham had a number of crossroads in his life when he did NOT believe in the promises of God. Yet he remained faithful even though he couldn't rationally work out how God would reconcile his promises with Abraham's reality. That's fidelity! That's covenant loyalty. That's your call by God.

Faith fluctuates with our emotions and our circumstances. Faithfulness stands unflinchingly on promises. We keep our promises because of the love we have for the character of the one to whom we pledged our loyalty. Your character is only as deep as the covenant you keep. That's true in business, in marriage, in foreign policy, and certainly in our relationship with God. Keep the faith!

**Key Points:**

- Abraham's trust (faith) in God is the model of fidelity Christians emulate today.
- A covenant is a one-sided agreement between two parties that includes conditions, terms, and promises/punishments.
- Abraham's lineage blesses the nations not when nations come into Israel but when Israel goes out to the nations.

**Action Step:** Read Romans 3:21-31 replacing the word "faith" with "faithfulness".

**Further Resources:** Mont W. Smith, [\*What the Bible Says About Covenant\*](#) (Joplin, 1981).