

God's Unconditional Promises



Topic

God's faithfulness

Theme

God is faithful and worthy of our faithfulness to Him.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will appreciate God's faithfulness and will seek to be faithful to God.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 7
- Notecards

Scripture Focus

Genesis 11:31–13:2

Summary

After dealing with humanity in largely a universal manner (Gen. 1–11), God selected one man to whom He would uniquely relate. That man was Abram. God communicated unconditional promises to give land, offspring, and blessings to Abram. God then demonstrated His faithfulness by beginning to accomplish those promises in Abram's life. God's promise-keeping work happened both when Abram responded faithfully to God and when he responded unfaithfully.

Outline

I. God's Faithful Selection (11:31–12:3)

- A. Abram's family history (11:31, 32)
- B. God selects Abram (12:1–3)

II. God Demonstrates Faithfulness (12:4–20)

- A. God's generous faithfulness (12:4–9)
- B. God's steadfast faithfulness (12:10–20)

Memory Verses

"For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee" (Hebrews 6:13, 14).

GETTING STARTED

Define Faithful

Organize learners in groups of no more than five people. Tell the groups they will have three minutes to develop a one-sentence definition of the word *faithful*. If possible, display a timer on a projection screen; it will help everyone stay on task. (Free downloadable timer applications are available online.) Have each group share its definition.

ASK: What are some synonyms for faithful? *Loyal, trustworthy, true, reliable, steadfast, devoted, staunch, etc.*

ASK: How do we know if someone is faithful? *We observe his behavior over time. We witness the completion of promised actions.*

ASK: Is it easier to observe someone's faithfulness when you are considering his actions toward people in general or toward one specific person? Why?

This lesson covers God's selection of and relationship with Abram. God communicated unconditional promises to Abram. God then demonstrated His faithfulness by beginning to accomplish those promises in Abram's life.

The Most Faithful

God is perfectly faithful and we are called to respond faithfully to Him. Give each of your students a notecard. Instruct them to write the name of a Biblical character, excluding Jesus, who they think was the most faithful to God. Once everyone has written the name of the Bible character, instruct the students to stand and find other learners who wrote the same name on their card. Learners should form and stay in groups representing their shared answer. Once groups are formed (individuals selecting a unique name can stay by themselves), instruct the groups to briefly discuss why they made their selection. Ask a member of the group to report a summary.

ASK: How do we know if someone is faithful? *We observe his behavior over time. We witness the completion of promised actions.*

ASK: In your opinion, what is the key to being faithful? *Depending upon God through prayer. Being committed.*

ASK: How does human faithfulness differ from God's faithfulness? *God's faithfulness is perfectly constant; human faithfulness wavers.*

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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. God's Faithful Selection (11:31–12:3)

A. Abram's family history (11:31, 32)

Abram, later renamed Abraham, began a move at the prompting of his father, Terah, from one side to the other of what we now call the Fertile Crescent. These verses and the preceding ones are sparse on details. Many questions arise from the text that are not answered, such as How did Abram's brother Haran die (cf. Gen. 11:28)? Was Abram or Terah the primary caregiver for Lot? Why did they decide to move from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan? These verses provide the family background for the main human protagonist, Abram, in the new section of the book of Genesis that starts with chapter 12.

READ: Genesis 11:31, 32. **ASK:** Are there any family details shared in these verses that highlight this family as exemplars of faith or godliness? (Q3) *No, the details are rather plain and unassuming.*

ASK: According to these verses, did Abram's family experience any special circumstances that would differentiate them from others? (Q4) *No.*

God's interest in choosing Abram had less to do with Abram than it did with God Himself. God's selection was based on faithfully continuing His plan, not on how great a guy Abram was. In fact, selecting an unassuming guy like Abram draws our focus to God's faithfulness even more.

B. God selects Abram (12:1–3)

Genesis introduces God's speech to Abram with the past perfect *had said*. This indicates that God had previously communicated these words to Abram. This wording communicates a slow development in Abram's initial belief, making the following words all the more surprising.

READ: Acts 7:1–4. **ASK:** According to Stephen, when did Abram first hear from God? (Q5) *While Abram was in Mesopotamia in Ur.*

ASK: What does Abram's delay in obedience by settling in Haran communicate about Abram's level of faith? (Q6) *Abram was not fully obeying God's direction. His faith was not strong.*

Despite Abram's reluctance to fully obey God, God still selected Abram to be the one through whom God would continue His plan and reveal Himself to the world. God's choice of Abram was not based upon Abram's special ability to obey God. In fact, he seems to have been reluctant to obey. God's choice of Abram was not based on a legacy of generational faith in the true God. At best his family members were recent converts from idolatry. God's choice was based on His gracious and loving character. God's faithfulness to already communicated promises,

Some historic and modern commentators view the family's move away from Ur as a turn away from idolatry (cf. Josh. 24:2). However, this is conjecture from silence; it is better to leave the question unanswered.

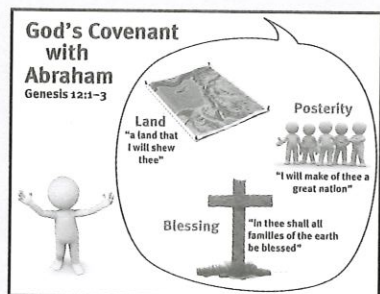
such as the promise of a Satan defeater (Gen. 3:15), would be advanced through the choice of a sinner, Abram.

God's plan transitioned to one man when He commanded Abram to leave his family and go to a land that God would show him. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis, God's interactions with humanity are largely universal in scope. God's selection of Abram began a new manner of God interacting with humanity. God selected one person, and ultimately his descendants, through whom God would continue His plan and reveal His character.

READ: Genesis 12:1–3. **ASK:** What did God promise he would do for Abram? (Q7) *God promised to make Abram a great nation, to bless Abram, to make Abram's name great, to bless those who bless Abram, to curse those who dishonor Abram, and to bless all the families of earth in Abram.*

RESOURCE: Display resource 7 to summarize God's covenant with Abram.

ASK: What makes a nation great? (Q8) *Wealth, a growing population, good laws, freedom, power.*



God made several promises to Abram. The first promise was to make Abram into a great nation. Given the barren condition of Abram's (11:30) and Abram's old age of seventy-five (12:4), this is a truly remarkable promise. It indicates both that God would make Abram into a great nation numerically and a nation of great significance. The Bible later reveals this nation is the nation of Israel.

The second promise was to bless Abram. The word *bless* appears five times in Genesis 1–11. In contrast the word appears five times in Genesis 12:1–3. God's blessing of Abram and his family is a major component of God's unique dealings with this family. God promising to bless Abram is a commitment to prosperity, family growth, success, and physical protection. Some of these aspects are made clearer in the promises that followed.

The third promise was to make Abram's name great. This did not mean Abram would simply be famous, although that did happen. This promise meant Abram's name would be highly regarded. He would be a man with good character. God's purpose for this promise was for Abram to be a blessing to others. He became a blessing because of what God did through him. This promise is less about how great Abram became and more about God's greatness seen through Abram.

The fourth promise had a positive and a negative side. God promised to bless those who bless Abram and curse the one who curses or dishonors Abram. Abram's unique status of being graciously chosen by God made Abram a special conduit for God's activity in the world. Treating Abram well was analogous to treating God well, and people therefore received God's blessing. Conversely, mistreatment of Abram reflected a mistreatment of God, resulting in appropriate consequences.

ASK: God used the plural when talking about blessing and the singular when talking about cursing (Gen. 12:3). What might this communicate about God? (Q9) *The wording of blessing "those who bless" compared with cursing "him*

who curses" is a subtle communication of God's will to extend grace rather than punishment. He wants to bless more than He wants to curse.

The final promise communicated the universal implications of God's choice of Abram. Through this one man and his progeny, all the families of the earth would be blessed. God promised to deliver humanity from Satan through a descendant of Eve (Gen. 3:15); that descendant, Christ Jesus, eventually came from this specific family.

God's selection of just one man focused the revelation of God's character and continued His plan for the redemption of mankind. God's characteristics became clearer through His dealings with Israel than they would have been if He had continued to deal primarily with humanity in general. God selecting Abram and then providentially and supernaturally working in and for him reveals God's ownership of everything and His ability to do as He pleases. So Abram became the pivotal person in God's dealings with humanity.

II. God Demonstrates Faithfulness (12:4–20)

A. God's generous faithfulness (12:4–9)

God immediately demonstrated His faithfulness to Abram by bringing him into the land He had promised to him while Abram was in Ur (Gen. 12:1). Despite the passage of many years and Abram's initial failure to obey, God was faithful to His word. Abram found out specifically from God what was implicit in verse 1: God was not only taking Abram *to* a land, but He was also *giving* Abram the land. God as Creator has the right to do whatever He wants with His creation. God gave the land to Abram to serve as a platform from which He would demonstrate His character through Abram's descendants for generations.

READ: Genesis 12:4–9. **ASK:** What impossibilities would God have to overcome by giving Canaan to Abram's descendants? (Q10) *God would somehow have to kick the Canaanites out and give Abram a son in his old age.*

After Abram arrived in the land, he reciprocated God's faithfulness with faithfulness of his own. The Lord appeared to him near Shechem and reiterated His promises concerning the land. Abram responded by building an altar to the Lord (12:7). Abram then moved through the central portion of the land, building another altar between Bethel and Ai (12:8). He went on to go through the southern region (12:9). No doubt he was interested in seeing both what the land was like and who lived there.

B. God's steadfast faithfulness (12:10–20)

God's providential protection of Abram despite Abram's own poor decisions highlights God's consistently faithful character. God keeps His promises no matter what.

READ: Genesis 12:10. **ASK:** What do you suppose Abram thought of the land once the famine arrived? (Q11) *Perhaps he questioned if it had any true value, or perhaps he wondered if there might be a better place to inherit.*

The acronym LOB is a helpful way to remember the key aspects of God's unconditional promises communicated to Abram in Genesis 12: *L* is for *Land*, *O* is for *Offspring*, and *B* is for *Blessing*.

Negeb (Negev) means "south" in Hebrew. Abram journeyed within the land from north to south.

ASK: What might a person in his situation be tempted to conclude about God's faithfulness? (Q12) *That God cannot be faithful because His abilities are limited: He gave the land but couldn't keep it fruitful.*

The promises God gave to Abram were a tremendous blessing. But the promises were valuable only because God made the promises. Abram's relationship with God made the promises meaningful. When the famine came, the land didn't look like such a great place to live. But knowing the Lord was near, that He had graciously made Abram unconditional promises, and that He was in control of His creation should have given Abram contentment and peace. Instead, he left the land for the abundance in Egypt. Apparently he did so of his own volition.

Abram's ruse of presenting Sarai as his sister rather than his wife is part of a trio of similar yet distinct stories involving Abram and eventually his son (cf. Gen. 20:1–18; 26:1, 7–17).

The language of Sarai being taken into Pharaoh's house does not necessitate sexual relations (cf. Gen. 34:2; 38:2).

Nearing Egypt and being fearful for his own safety on account of his beautiful wife, Abram devised a plan to present Sarai as his sister rather than his wife. This ruse was based upon a half-truth. Sarai was in fact the daughter of Abram's father but by a different mother (cf. 20:12).

Just as Abram had thought, the Egyptians found Sarai beautiful. Abram's planned worked for a time. Members of Pharaoh's court, however, soon took notice; they took Sarai into Pharaoh's house. Although the text does not provide the details of Abram's thoughts upon these events, it is likely that Abram was not anticipating this level of consequences to his actions.

BIBLE STUDY: Organize your learners into pairs. Instruct the pairs to read Genesis 12:10–20 and to note the various ways God protected and blessed Abram and Sarai. (Q13) *He provided for their needs despite their departure from the land. He protected Sarai from harm. He caused Pharaoh to give Abram material goods and send him away unharmed.*

ASK: When have you been surprised by the intensity of the consequences from your faithless actions? (Q14)

ASK: How did God demonstrate His faithfulness toward you despite your poor decisions? (Q15)

Pharaoh gave lavish gifts to Abram. Perhaps he intended them as bridal gifts for what he viewed as a betrothal. The gifts included sheep for their wool and meat, donkeys for their burden bearing, oxen for their hard work, and camels for transportation. Domesticated camels were rare in Abram's day. They indicate that the gifts were particularly luxurious.

The proximity of this account to Genesis 12:1–3 indicates these gifts were a blessing from God. This does not mean that God approved of Abram's actions. God was acting graciously in giving Abram what he didn't deserve.

God providentially afflicted Pharaoh with great plagues (12:17). That might seem unfair to Pharaoh, but he was not innocent. The text communicates that Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's house against her will. So even though Pharaoh gave lavish gifts, he was still doing harm to Sarai.

ASK: How do God's actions in judging Pharaoh demonstrate His faithfulness to the promises communicated in Genesis 12:1–4? (Q16) *God cursed Pharaoh when he mistreated Abram and his family.*

God righteously judged Pharaoh and in turn Pharaoh correctly rebuked Abram. Abram's silence confirms he knew his actions were indefensible. Pharaoh had Abram and Sarai sent out of Egypt.

READ: Genesis 12:10; 13:1, 2. **ASK:** How did Abram's station in life change while in Egypt? (Q17) *Abram went from in need due to the famine to very rich (Gen. 13:2).*

Genesis 13:1 and 2 conclude the Genesis 12 accounts. These important verses communicate that Abram was greatly blessed in Egypt. The same Hebrew word translated *severe* in reference to the famine in Genesis 12:10 is used in 13:2 to describe Abram as *very rich*. To phrase it literally, Abram became *severely* rich in Egypt. His livestock gains can be attributed to Pharaoh's gift. However, Abram likely earned the gold and silver mentioned through business dealings in the land.

We don't have Abram's response to this incident, but we can still come to some conclusions about what he learned from reviewing what we do know. God promised Abram land and blessing. Yet Abram left Canaan apparently of his own volition and concocted a plan to try to protect himself from Pharaoh. When Abram's plan blew up in his face, he must have realized that he lacked the ability to control his life and circumstances. His posterity was at stake in that his wife was in Pharaoh's house. If he asked for Sarai back, he believed Pharaoh would put him to death. Abram's plan left him in a jam that only God could help him out of. God brought the plagues on Pharaoh to bring about Sarai's deliverance. And God gave Abram riches to take back to Canaan to provide for his needs during the famine.

The plagues and riches both communicated to Abram that God is faithful and therefore worthy of his trust. It was as if God was saying, *Abram, I will take care of you. See how richly I blessed you even though you got yourself into a terrible bind? You need to trust Me. I am in control, and I will always be faithful to you. Stop trying to ensure My promises will be fulfilled.*

READ: Genesis 26:1–4. **ASK:** Years later, what did God tell Isaac to do in response to a second famine in Canaan? (Q18) *God told Isaac to not go to Egypt but to stay in the land. God promised to bless Isaac in the land.*

God's message to Isaac helps us see what God wanted Abram to do. God wanted both men to stay put and to trust Him because of the promises He had made to them (Gen. 26:2, 3). His promises were contingent on *His* faithfulness (Heb. 6:13, 14). If they doubted His promises or tried to help God keep them, they were in essence doubting God and questioning His abilities and faithfulness. In the end, Abraham trusted God (26:5) and became an example of faith for believers today (Heb. 11:9). That process will be the topic of the next few lessons.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

The Bad and Good

Genesis 12 contains two accounts of God demonstrating His faithfulness in accomplishing the promises He gave to Abram. In the first account, Abram responded appropriately by faithfully worshiping God. In the second account, Abram showed a lack of faith in God as he tried to take matters into his own hands.

ASK: Describe a time when you responded wrongly to God's faithfulness. What were the contributing circumstances or motivations that tempted you to respond as you did? (Q19)

ASK: Describe a time when you responded correctly to God's faithfulness. What actions evidenced your correct response? (Q20)

Faithful Responses

ASK: How would you finish the following statements? (Q21)

- God has demonstrated His faithfulness to me by . . .
- I will in turn demonstrate faithfulness to God by . . .

ASK: What specific action steps will you take this week to put your commitment into action? (Q22)

Summary and Memory Verses

RESOURCE: Display resource 1. Add a summary statement for lesson 5 or use the following: Be faithful in response to God's faithfulness.

Encourage learners to memorize Hebrews 6:13 and 14. Give them an opportunity to say the verses in class next week.

