

Cutting the Covenant

Genesis 15–17

Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the verse the New Testament built on (faith reckoned as righteousness), watches God walk the path of death between the covenant pieces alone, sits honestly with the Hagar detour, and receives the covenant signs: circumcision and new names. Tonight the sealed guesses are opened.

Catholic Touchstone. Abraham as the model of the obedience of faith (CCC 145–146); the promise fulfilled against all human hope (CCC 705–706); circumcision as covenant sign prefiguring baptism (CCC 527, 1150).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Genesis 15 opens with two firsts: the first “the word of the LORD came” formula (the prophetic formula, applied first to Abram) and the Bible’s first “Fear not.” And what follows the reassurance is remarkable: Abram complains. “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless?” (15:2). Years have passed since 12:1; the promise has no heir but a household servant. God’s response is not rebuke but stars: He takes him outside, has him look up, and re-promises the impossible. Then the verse on which mountains of theology stand: “And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Paul will build Romans 4 and Galatians 3 on it; James will quote it too (James 2:23), with a twist tonight’s steelman must handle honestly.

The covenant ceremony (15:7–21) needs its ancient context to land. To “cut a covenant,” parties cut animals in two and walked between the pieces: an enacted oath meaning “may this be done to me if I break my word.” Jeremiah 34:18 confirms the custom explicitly: the men who “cut the calf in two and passed between its parts.” Now watch Genesis: the animals are cut, the sun sets, a deep sleep (tardemah, the same word as Adam’s sleep when the bride was built from his side) falls on Abram with dread and great darkness, God speaks a hard future (four hundred years of affliction before the land is given: Egypt, foretold), and then, in the dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch pass between the pieces. God alone walks the path of death. Abram never does. The covenant’s establishment is unilateral: God alone swears, and Abram bears no oath and no self-curse. The tradition, reading forward to Galatians 3:13, hears in this the shape of what Christ will do: the Covenant-Keeper absorbing the covenant-breakers’ penalty. And the covenant, once given, still summons a whole life: “Walk before me, and be blameless” is two chapters away (17:1). Hold your breath here; the study’s central question (what will God do about the ruin?) has just received its most astonishing answer so far, and the sealed guesses open tonight in its light.

Genesis 16 is the self-help chapter, and it must be handled with honesty on every side. Ten years in, Sarai proposes the era’s legal workaround: an heir through her slave. Abram “hearkened to the voice of Sarai” (the narrator’s echo of Adam in 3:17 is audible), Hagar conceives, contempt and harshness follow, and a pregnant Egyptian slave flees into the wilderness. Do not sand the edges: Sarai is harsh, Abram is passive, Hagar is used, and the covenant promise does not advance through this human plan. But the wilderness scene that follows is one of the tenderest in Genesis: the angel of the LORD (the figure’s first appearance in Scripture) finds her, names her unborn son Ishmael (“God hears”), and Hagar does what

Scripture narrates of no one else: she confers a name on God, El Roi, “a God of seeing” (16:13). The God of Abraham is the God who sees the used, the discarded, and those outside the chosen line. Pastorally, someone in your room is Hagar; let this scene find them.

Then thirteen years of narrated silence (16:16 to 17:1: Abram goes from eighty-six to ninety-nine between verses). God appears as El Shaddai, God Almighty: “Walk before me, and be blameless.” The covenant is unfolded with signs: new names, Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”), Sarai to Sarah (“princess”); remember Babel: the name grasped there is here given, expanded, doubled. And circumcision: the covenant cut into the flesh, on the organ of generation, because the promise rides on offspring; administered to every male at eight days old (17:12), which means the covenant embraced its members before they could choose, earn, or understand it: the pattern the Church recognizes in infant baptism, the “circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11–12; CCC 527; on infant baptism, CCC 1250–1252). Abraham falls on his face and laughs (17:17), the Bible’s first laugh, half worship and half incredulity, and God names the son after it: Isaac, “he laughs.” Abraham’s plea “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” receives a real answer: the covenant runs through Sarah’s son, and Ishmael is heard (his name again), blessed, and made a great nation too. Election, again, is not rejection of the others.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Genesis 15:6 is quoted three times in the New Testament, and the three uses together give the Catholic whole: Romans 4 (righteousness reckoned to faith, before circumcision, so that Abraham can father all believers), Galatians 3 (those who share Abraham’s faith share his blessing, and the seed is Christ), and James 2:21–23, where the same verse is “fulfilled” decades later on Moriah, when faith “was completed by works.” One verse, one faith, alive from first credit to final act.

The fire passing between the pieces has its New Testament echo where the covenant curse actually lands: at the Cross, where the Covenant-Keeper absorbs the covenant-breakers’ penalty in His own body. Hebrews meditates on God’s oath-keeping directly: “when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself” (Hebrews 6:13), that we “might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us” (6:18). And Colossians 2:11–12 hands the covenant sign forward: buried with Him in baptism, the circumcision made without hands.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons · *Against Heresies, Book IV*

St. Irenaeus teaches, in substance, that Abraham is the father of believers precisely because he followed the Word of God: righteousness was his by faith before the Law existed, before circumcision was given, and so the Church of every nation, believing the same Word, is Abraham’s true family. The faith of the uncircumcised Abram and the faith of the baptized Christian are one faith in one God.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas · *Summa Theologiae III, q. 70*

St. Thomas teaches, in substance, that circumcision was a sacrament-like sign of the old covenant: a profession of faith cut into the body, given even to infants, deriving its power from faith in the Christ to come. It prepared for and prefigures baptism, which fulfills it with a greater gift: not the

removal of a piece of flesh but the circumcision of the heart, the stripping off of the old self.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Catherine of Siena · *The Dialogue*

The great image of St. Catherine's Dialogue is the Bridge: Christ crucified stretched between heaven and earth, God's own self spanning the gulf that no human climbing could cross. She teaches, in substance, that God does not wait on the far bank shouting instructions; He makes Himself the way. Read in the light of her Bridge image, we may see Abram asleep in the dark while God walks the path of death alone as the Bridge in its oldest sketch; that is an application this study draws from her image, not a comment Catherine herself makes on Genesis 15.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- CCC 145–146: Abraham obeys, goes, believes; he thus fulfills the definition of faith given in Hebrews 11:1 and becomes the father of all who believe.
- CCC 705–706: against all human hope, God promises descendants to Abraham, the fruit of faith and of the power of the Holy Spirit; the promise inaugurates the economy of salvation.
- CCC 762: the covenant with Abraham is the remote preparation of the People of God.
- CCC 1150: circumcision stands among the covenant signs of the Old Testament that prefigure the sacraments of the New.
- CCC 527: Jesus' own circumcision is the sign of His incorporation into Abraham's descendants and prefigures the “circumcision of Christ,” which is baptism (Colossians 2:11–12).
- CCC 1250–1252: infants, born with fallen human nature, need the new birth of Baptism; the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is shown particularly in infant Baptism, an immemorial tradition of the Church.
- CCC 2570: Abraham's prayer begins with attentive obedience to the word; his heart is submitted to the Speaker before it understands the plan.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

- SEED THREAD REVEAL TONIGHT. Run the reveal after the covenant-ceremony discovery (the placement is in the Discussion Guide). The route to show, briefly, on paper or a board: “very good” broken (Session 3), seed promised (3:15), line preserved through Seth and Noah, narrowed to Shem, landed on Abraham (12:7, 15:4–5), and tonight sworn with God's own life as the stake. Then forward, in one sentence only: the seed will one day be one Man, and the path of death God walked between the pieces He will walk again, uphill, outside Jerusalem. Do not name Session 10's content.
- NAME THREAD: Babel grasped, God gives: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah. Draw the line aloud; the group built both halves.
- SACRIFICE THREAD: the cut animals join Abel's firstlings, Noah's altar, Melchizedek's bread and wine. Two sessions from now this thread crests; say nothing.
- Adam echoes to hold silently: tardemah (deep sleep) at the covenant as at the building of the bride; “hearkened to the voice of” linking 16:2 to 3:17. Use them only if the group finds them.

- Hagar and Ishmael return in Session 9 (the sending away). Tonight's El Roi tenderness is the deposit that makes next week's hard scene survivable; do not spend it cheaply.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group discovers Genesis 15:6 in context: honest complaint, stars, credit of righteousness.
2. The group reconstructs the covenant-cutting ceremony from the text plus Jeremiah 34:18, and articulates who walks between the pieces, and what that means.
3. The sealed guesses are opened and honored, and the seed thread is shown from 3:15 to the oath.
4. The group works the faith-alone steelman with Romans 4 and James 2 both on the table, and can state the Catholic synthesis.
5. Each participant names one place they are running a Genesis 16: forcing God's promise by self-help, and one act of returning to trust.

TIMED PLAN (75–90 MINUTES)

- Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- Win questions (10 min)
- Build: Genesis 15:1–6, Q1 (15 min)
- Build: the ceremony, Q2 and discovery; then THE REVEAL of sealed guesses (20 min)
- Build: Genesis 16, Q3; Genesis 17, Q4 briskly (15 min)
- Steelman: faith alone (15 min)
- Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (10 min)

If time runs short: *Cut the Dig Deeper first, then compress Q4 (deliver the chapter 17 material as a five-minute teach). Never cut the reveal or the steelman. If the reveal runs long because the room comes alive, sacrifice Q4 entirely; the room being alive is the point.*

Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Father, You are not afraid of our honest questions; You answered Abram's complaint with stars. Tonight, take us outside our small ceilings. Show us the oath You swore, the path You walked alone in the dark, and the righteousness You credit to everyone who believes You. Through Christ, the Keeper of the covenant. Amen.

WIN • OPEN THE ROOM

W1. Have you ever made a promise that cost you far more to keep than to make? Did you keep it?

W2. When you were a kid, what did you want to be absolutely sure of? What did being sure require?

BUILD • INTO THE TEXT

Read 15:1–6 aloud to open. Keep the sealed envelopes visible at the front of the room from the first minute; say nothing about them until the reveal. Anticipation is doing work for you.

Q1. Look at 15:1–6. God opens with “Fear not” and a promise; Abram answers with a complaint. How does God respond to being complained at? And what exactly happens in verse 6: who does what?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God does not rebuke the complaint; He answers it, with stars. Honest protest inside a relationship of trust is not unbelief; the Psalms will make a whole prayer book out of it. Abram tells God the truth about his disappointment, and God enlarges the promise instead of withdrawing it.

Verse 6, the hinge: Abram believes the LORD (entrusts himself to the Speaker, not just the statement), and the LORD reckons it, credits it, as righteousness. Right standing with God is received by trust before it is expressed in anything else. Every New Testament argument about faith starts here, and tonight's steelman will put all three of its quotations on the table.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Live discovery: the ceremony. Read 15:7–21 aloud, slowly. Then send a reader to Jeremiah 34:18 and ask: “What did walking between the pieces mean in this world?” Then ask the room the only question that matters: “In Genesis 15, who passes between the pieces, and who does not?” Let the silence stretch.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The custom, confirmed by Jeremiah: covenant parties passed between the halved animals, enacting “may this death be mine if I break this word.” It is an oath with a body count attached.

In Genesis 15, only God passes: the smoking fire pot and flaming torch move between the pieces while Abram lies in deep sleep and darkness. Abram takes on no self-curse; the whole weight of the oath rests on God. The tradition, reading forward (Galatians 3:13), hears the full depth: the covenant God who will, in Christ, absorb even our side of the breach. The Bible will spend the rest of its pages showing what keeping this promise cost Him. Hold this; the envelopes come out now.

THE REVEAL. Hand back the sealed sheets. Invite (never compel) participants to read their Session 1 guesses aloud: "What will have gone wrong, and what will God do about it?" Receive every guess with honor; most rooms produce at least one that lands close and one that lands beautifully wrong. Then show the route on your board: 'very good' broken; the seed promised in the ruins (3:15); the line preserved through flood and scattering; narrowed to one barren household; and tonight, sworn, with God Himself walking the death-path alone. Close the moment with one forward sentence, no more: the seed will one day be one Man, and God will walk that path again. Then move on; do not deflate it with commentary.

Q3. Genesis 16. Ten years have passed since the promise. Read the chapter without defending anyone. What does each of the three adults do wrong? And then: what does God do for the person with the least standing in the story?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Sarai treats a slave as a solution and then punishes her for it working; Abram "hearkened to the voice of Sarai" (hear the echo of Adam) and stays passive while his household breaks; Hagar, given power by pregnancy, wields contempt. Nobody is clean, and the covenant promise does not advance through this plan: God never needed the workaround. Self-help that runs ahead of God manufactures Ishmaels: real people, really loved by God, born of our refusal to wait.

And then the wilderness: the angel of the LORD's first appearance in all Scripture is to a pregnant, runaway, Egyptian slave. He finds her, dignifies her with the Bible's classic question ("where have you come from and where are you going?"), promises her son a future, and tells her to return and submit to Sarai (16:9), the hardest verse in the scene, and do not skip it. Within this one story, the return carries Hagar and her son back under Abram's roof, where the promise just made to her can unfold; it is a command inside a single unrepeatable narrative, not Scripture's prescription that the mistreated must return to mistreatment. Say plainly if the room needs it: God's seeing of Hagar is not God's endorsement of Sarai's harshness, and no one today is being told to remain in an abusive or dangerous situation. And she names God: El Roi, the God of seeing, the one place Scripture narrates a human bestowing a name on God ("she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her," 16:13), a distinction commentators note belongs to Hagar alone. If anyone in this room has ever been used and discarded: the first person to name God was one of you.

Q4. Genesis 17, briskly. Thirteen silent years, then God speaks. Gather the covenant's new furniture: what changes about names, what sign is given, who receives the sign and when, and what happens to Abraham's face in verse 17?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Names are given, not grasped: Abram becomes Abraham, father of a multitude; Sarai becomes Sarah, princess. Babel wanted to make a name; God makes names. The sign is circumcision: the covenant cut into the flesh itself, on the organ of generation, because this covenant travels by promise-carried offspring; and it is given at eight days old (17:12), to members who cannot yet choose, earn, or understand: grace embracing before comprehension, the logic the Church knows in infant baptism, which Colossians calls the circumcision of Christ (CCC 527; on infant baptism, CCC 1250-1252).

And Abraham falls on his face laughing: the Bible's first laugh, worship and incredulity in one sound, at the arithmetic (one hundred plus ninety equals a nursery). God does not scold the laugh;

He names the boy after it: Isaac, “he laughs.” And Abraham’s fatherly plea for Ishmael is heard: not the covenant line, but blessed, fruitful, a great nation. God’s yes to Isaac is not a no to Ishmael’s worth.

BUILD, THEN PRESS · STEELMAN

Build it at full strength; this is the central Reformation text and many of you have heard it preached well.

“Genesis 15:6 plus Romans 4 is the whole case. Abraham believed and was counted righteous: full stop. Paul is explicit that it happened before circumcision (Romans 4:10–11), so no rite, ritual, or sacrament contributed anything; and explicit that it was not by works (Romans 4:2–5), so no obedience contributed anything. Justification is by faith alone, and Rome’s system of sacraments, merit, and cooperation is precisely the works-righteousness Paul demolished. The Catholic Church has built a cathedral on the grave of this verse.”

Press it: read Romans 4:4–5 aloud before answering. It is a strong text. Let it be strong.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Begin with full agreement where agreement is owed: no one earns the beginning of righteousness. The Church teaches that nothing preceding justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification (CCC 1996, 2007–2010, and the Council of Trent says it in nearly those words). Abram was credited righteousness as a gift, before circumcision, before Sinai, before Moriah. If anyone in this room thinks they are climbing to God on performance, Romans 4 is aimed at them, and the Church says amen.

But now put all three New Testament quotations of Genesis 15:6 on the table. James quotes the same verse and asks about the same man: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? ... and the scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:21–24). The only time “faith alone” appears in the Bible, it has “not by” in front of it. James is not contradicting Paul; he is completing the timeline: the faith credited in Genesis 15 was living, and its life showed: it “was completed by works” decades later on Moriah. Abraham’s justification is not a receipt filed in a drawer; it is a life that keeps saying yes. Paul agrees: what counts is “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6), and the obedience of faith frames his whole gospel (Romans 1:5, 16:26).

As for circumcision: Paul calls it “a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith” (Romans 4:11): God’s own appointed sign, sealing what grace had done, commanded for every child of the covenant thereafter. That is precisely what the Church claims for sacraments: not human works that purchase grace, but God’s instruments that seal and convey it, faith’s family receiving before it can perform (CCC 527, 1150). So: justified by grace, through living faith, never by a faith that remains alone, sealed by the signs God Himself commands. That is Genesis 15 through 22 read whole, and it is the Catholic position.

DIG DEEPER · THE GOD WHO SEES

El Roi is never used of God again in Scripture, which makes it Hagar's forever: the discarded woman's private name for the God who came looking for her. The well where it happened gets a name too: Beer-lahai-roi, "the well of the Living One who sees me" (16:14), and Genesis quietly notes later that Isaac, the promised son, settles there (25:11). The child of the promise makes his home at the well of the woman outside the covenant line, though not outside God's promises: He gave her one of her own (16:10). God's geography has a sense of justice.

SEND • OUT THE DOOR

S1. Where are you currently running a Genesis 16: engineering by self-help what God has promised to give? What would waiting with open hands look like there this month?

S2. God walked the death-path alone while Abram slept. What would change this week if you actually believed the covenant is carried by His fidelity and not your consistency?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Go outside one clear night this week, look up until you lose count, and pray Genesis 15:6 over the promise you find hardest to trust.
- Identify your Ishmael-project: one thing you are forcing. Write down its name, and beneath it write "El Roi sees me," and fast from forcing it for seven days.
- If you were baptized as an infant, thank God this week for a covenant that embraced you before you could earn or understand it; find out your baptism date if you do not know it.
- Read Genesis 18–21 before next session. Note every place someone laughs, and who is listening at tent doors.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." (**Genesis 15:6**)

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, El Shaddai, El Roi: You swear by Yourself because there is no one greater, and You see us because there is no one nearer. Credit to us the righteousness we could never assemble, complete our faith with works of love, and keep us from forcing what You have promised to give. Through Christ, who walked the path of death for both sides of the covenant. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in the Discussion Guide, in order.

Where It Is Used	Passage
Opening reading	Genesis 15:1–6
Q1 the complaint and the credit	Genesis 15:1–6
Ceremony discovery	Genesis 15:7–21; Jeremiah 34:18
The reveal route	Genesis 3:15; 12:7; 15:4–5
Q3 the self-help chapter	Genesis 16
Q4 covenant signs	Genesis 17:1–22; Colossians 2:11–12
Steelman texts	Romans 4:2–11; James 2:21–24; Galatians 5:6
Steelman doctrine	CCC 1996, 2007–2010, 527, 1150, 1250–1252
God's oath	Hebrews 6:13–18
Dig Deeper	Genesis 16:13–14; 25:11
Memory verse	Genesis 15:6