

SESSION 4

Count the Stars

Abram, the Three Promises, and the God Who Walks Between the Pieces

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Participants discover the three promises of Genesis 12 that structure the rest of the Bible, decode the cutting ceremony of Genesis 15 using Jeremiah 34, and confront its staggering implication: God alone passes between the pieces, taking the covenant curse upon himself.

Catholic Touchstone. God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him and his descendants; the people descended from Abraham would be the trustee of the promise made to the patriarchs, gathered in preparation for the day when God would unite all his children into the Church (CCC 59 to 60, 762).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Genesis 11 ends salvation history's darkest stretch: Babel, the nations scattered, and a genealogy that dead ends in a childless couple, uprooted from Ur and stalled in Haran (11:30 to 32). Then Genesis 12:1 to 3, and God speaks to a seventy five year old childless man. Read the speech slowly and count: God promises to make Abram (1) a great nation, (2) a great name with blessing, and (3) a blessing to "all the families of the earth." Those three promises are the table of contents for the rest of the Bible. Watch how each is later upgraded to a covenant: nationhood sworn at Sinai (Exodus 19 to 24), the great name and dynasty sworn to David (2 Samuel 7), and the worldwide blessing sworn in the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; Galatians 3:8, where Paul flatly calls the promise to Abraham "the gospel, beforehand"). Do not lecture this to the group; tonight they secure the three promises, and the study will let them watch each one blossom.

Genesis 15 is the night the first promise becomes a covenant. Abram, still childless, asks how he can know, and God answers with a ceremony modern readers find bizarre and ancient readers found unmistakable: animals cut in two, the halves laid opposite each other, a path of blood between them. Jeremiah 34:18 to 20 preserves the meaning: parties who "cut a covenant" walked between the pieces, enacting a self curse: may what happened to these animals happen to me if I break this oath. Covenant making was oath swearing with your life on the table.

Now the detail on which everything turns. In the Bible's own example of this rite (Jeremiah 34:18 to 20), it is the parties bound by the covenant who walk between the pieces, taking the self curse on themselves. In Genesis 15:17, Abram is in a deep sleep, and "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch," fire and smoke being God's standard self manifestation (think Sinai, the pillar of fire), passed between the pieces alone. The ceremony's meaning is staggering: God alone walks the path, God alone places himself under the covenant curse, a unilateral, self sworn oath, with Abram asleep. And Christian readers, following the ceremony's logic through to Galatians 3:13, have long seen here God taking upon himself the consequences for both sides of the covenant. Abram contributes nothing that night but trust: "he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (15:6). The question the ceremony plants, and the question this study will carry for six more sessions, is what happens when the human side breaks the covenant and the self cursed God keeps his word.

Be honest with the group about the promises' scope. Genesis 15:18 includes land, "from the river of Egypt to the great river," and Israel's history takes it seriously; the Church does not allegorize the Old Testament away. But Scripture itself widens the inheritance: Paul says the promise to Abraham was that he would inherit not a strip of the Levant but "the world" (Romans 4:13), and Hebrews 11:9 to 10, 16 says Abraham himself was looking

through the land toward "a better country, that is, a heavenly one," "the city... whose builder and maker is God." Type and fulfillment, not either or.

One more seed to plant quietly: Genesis 15:6 will become the most fought over verse in Reformation history ("faith reckoned as righteousness"). Tonight, simply let the group see what the text shows: Abram's faith is not a one time transaction but the beginning of a costly, obedient, decades long walk, and it will be tested to the edge of death in Session 5. James 2:21 to 23 reads Genesis 15:6 as "fulfilled" on Moriah. Save the full engagement for the next session; plant the observation now.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The New Testament treats Genesis 12 and 15 as load bearing walls. Paul builds Romans 4 and Galatians 3 on them: the singular "seed" through whom blessing reaches the nations is Christ (Galatians 3:16), a singular seed the Church's reading traces back to the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15, which the group met in Session 2, and all the baptized are "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29). Galatians 3:8 goes further than most readers expect: Scripture "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations be blessed." The gospel is not plan B after the Old Testament failed; it is the third promise of Genesis 12 kept.

And the fire that passed between the pieces casts a long shadow. Galatians 3:13, which the group will not reach until the study's climax, says Christ redeemed us "having become a curse for us." Christian readers have long seen the One who walked the path of blood alone in Genesis 15 walking it again on a hill outside Jerusalem, with the self imprecation of the smoking fire pot kept in full. This is the Church's typological reading of the two texts together, and it is where this study's thread deliberately lands. Leaders should know where this thread lands; participants should be allowed to feel its weight slowly.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Genesis*

Preaching on God's dealings with Abram, St. John Chrysostom marveled at the divine condescension: the Lord of all stoops to human covenant customs, accommodating our weakness the way a father lisps with his child, so that Abram could have certainty in a form he could grasp. God does not merely make promises; he makes them in our language, with our rituals, sworn on his own life.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan *On Abraham*

St. Ambrose held up Abram's departure from Ur as the pattern of every soul's conversion: to leave country, kindred, and father's house is to leave the familiar securities that compete with God, trusting a promise you cannot yet see. Faith, for Ambrose, is not the absence of questions (Abram asks them freely) but the willingness to walk while the questions are still open.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine *City of God, Book 16*

Working through the Abraham narratives, St. Augustine insisted that the promises were spoken to Abraham but aimed at us: the patriarch's story is prophecy in the form of biography. In the fire passing between the divided animals he saw God signifying, in advance and in mystery, the judgment and deliverance that would

come through Abraham's promised seed.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 59 to 60. In order to gather together scattered humanity, God calls Abram from his country and makes him Abraham, that is, "the father of a multitude of nations." The people descended from Abraham would be the trustee of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church.

CCC 705 to 706. Against all human hope, God promises descendants to Abraham, as the fruit of faith and of the power of the Holy Spirit. In Abraham's progeny all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This progeny will be Christ himself.

CCC 762. The remote preparation for the gathering together of the People of God begins when he calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people.

CCC 2570 to 2571. When God calls him, Abraham goes forth "as the Lord had told him"; his heart is entirely submissive to the Word and so he obeys. Attentiveness of the heart and obedience are essential to prayer; only later does Abraham's first prayer in words appear: a veiled complaint reminding God of his promises which seem unfulfilled. Thus one aspect of the drama of prayer appears from the beginning: the test of faith in the fidelity of God.

THREAD WATCH

Leader only. Do not reveal. These threads are planted and developed quietly; participants discover them.

- Thread A, the widening family: household becomes tribe tonight; Abram moves with an entire clan (Genesis 12:5, "the persons that they had gotten in Haran"). The chart moment is still Session 8. Say nothing.
- Thread B, blood and oath: this is the session where the two halves of the thread fuse. The cutting ceremony IS blood as oath. Handle Genesis 15:17 with unhurried gravity; it is the single most important image in the first half of the study.
- Thread C, the mountain: quieter tonight, but note Genesis 12:8, Abram's altar in the hill country near Bethel. Moriah arrives next session and the thread goes loud.
- The three promises of Genesis 12:1 to 3 are the map of the whole study: nation (Sinai, Session 6), name and kingdom (David, Session 8), worldwide blessing (New Covenant, Sessions 10 to 12). Guard the map; the group draws it themselves over time.
- The sealed guess intersects tonight invisibly: participants guessed how God would bless the whole world through one family. Genesis 12:3 is the verse their guesses were unknowingly about. Do not connect it; Session 10 will.
- The covenant formula watch: still unspoken. It arrives next session in Genesis 17:7 to 8. Prepare to treat it as an event.

SESSION GOALS

1. Participants can list the three promises of Genesis 12:1 to 3 from the text and know that each returns later in the story.
2. Participants have decoded the cutting ceremony themselves using Jeremiah 34:18 to 20 rather than being told its meaning.

3. Participants have seen and felt the anomaly of Genesis 15:17: God alone passes between the pieces while Abram sleeps.
4. Participants can state the difference between reading the land promise as merely earthly and reading it as type widened to fulfillment (Romans 4:13; Hebrews 11:10, 16).
5. Participants leave carrying the open question the ceremony plants: what will it cost the self sworn God when the human side breaks the covenant?

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

Ninety minutes. Opening prayer and Win, 15 minutes. Build, 55 minutes: budget a full 25 minutes for the Genesis 15 sequence (Q5 through the steelman); the Jeremiah 34 discovery and the smoking fire pot deserve silence, not speed. Send, Live It, memory verse, and closing prayer, 20 minutes.

- If running long: Compress Q2 (Babel backdrop) into a two sentence leader setup instead of a discussion question.
- If running long: Assign the Dig Deeper box on Melchizedek for home reading; it is enrichment tonight and returns in force when the study reaches the priesthood material.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

Father, you called one man out of a dead end city and promised him the world, and when he asked how he could know, you did not scold him; you swore. Swear your promises over us again tonight in the reading of your word. Give us Abram's trust when the path is dark and the fire passes by, through Christ our Lord, the seed in whom all the families of the earth are blessed. Amen.

WIN | OPENING QUESTIONS

W1. What is the biggest leap you ever took on somebody's bare word, no contract, no guarantees? What made their word enough?

W2. When you want to be absolutely sure of something, what do you ask for: paperwork, collateral, a promise in front of witnesses? Why do we need promises reinforced?

BUILD | INTO THE WORD

1. Set the scene from the end of Genesis 11: Babel has scattered the nations, and the genealogy lands on a childless man, called out of Ur and stalled in Haran, whose wife "was barren; she had no child" (11:30). Why might God deliberately restart the blessing of the whole world with the one couple who, humanly speaking, cannot even continue their own family line?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

So that no one could ever mistake whose work it is. Every covenant advance in this study runs through human impossibility: a barren womb, a drowned world, a shepherd boy, a virgin. God builds his family from materials that cannot take the credit. Abram's biology is a theological statement: the seed of the woman will be the gift of God, not the achievement of man.

2. Read Genesis 12:1 to 3 aloud, slowly. Working straight from the text, how many distinct promises does God make? Name them in your own words and write them down; you will need this list for the rest of the study.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Three: (1) "I will make of you a great nation," nationhood, which requires land and offspring; (2) "I will... make your name great," a royal name, dynasty, greatness; (3) "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," a blessing with the whole world as its range. Have the group physically write the three down. The rest of the Bible is the story of each promise being upgraded from promise to sworn covenant, but do not reveal that; they will catch each one as it happens.

3. Genesis 15 opens with Abram doing something we might expect God to punish: he pushes back. Read 15:1 to 6. What does Abram say to God, how does God respond to the pushback, and what does verse 6 tell us happened in Abram that night under the stars?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Abram respectfully complains: you have given me no offspring; a slave will be my heir. God does not rebuke the honesty; he takes Abram outside, shows him the stars, and renews the promise: "so shall your descendants be." The Catechism (2570 to 2571) calls this the drama of prayer, the test of faith in God's fidelity, and honest complaint is part of it. And verse 6: "he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." File that verse; next session we will watch what that faith does when it is tested to the edge of death.

4. Then Abram asks the question this whole session hangs on (15:8): "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" And God's answer is... a butcher shop (15:9 to 11). Describe exactly what Abram does with the animals. What kind of scene is being set up?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

A heifer, a she goat, and a ram, each cut in two, the halves laid over against each other, with a bird on each side, and a path left between the halves; Abram drives the birds of prey away and waits. The group should feel the strangeness. This is not sacrifice on an altar; it is a corridor of blood, a stage set for something to pass through. What that something is, and what walking the corridor means, the Bible itself will tell us next.

LIVE DISCOVERY *(let the group find it)*

5. The Bible decodes its own rituals if you know where to look. Centuries later, Jeremiah confronts covenant breakers in Jerusalem, and in Jeremiah 34, verses 18 to 20, he tells them exactly what people were doing when they cut a calf in two and walked between the parts. Find it and read it aloud. What did the ceremony mean?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Jeremiah 34:18: "the men who transgressed my covenant... I will make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts." Walking between the pieces was a self curse, an acted oath: may I become like these animals if I break this covenant. Verses 19 to 20 spell out the sentence being enacted: their dead bodies shall be food for the birds, which may cast a chilling backward light on the birds of prey Abram was driving off the carcasses, a resonance worth letting the group notice, without pressing it as the text's own explanation. To cut a covenant was to put your own life on the table.

LIVE DISCOVERY *(let the group find it)*

6. Now the moment. Read Genesis 15:12 and 15:17 with complete attention. Who is available to walk between the pieces, in what state is Abram, and what actually passes down the corridor of blood?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Abram is in a deep sleep, a dread filled darkness upon him; he could not walk if he wanted to. What passes between the pieces is "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch," fire and smoke, the Bible's standard signature of God himself (the burning bush, the pillar of fire, Sinai wrapped in smoke). In Jeremiah 34, the ones bound by the covenant walk between the pieces and take the oath on themselves. Here God, and God alone, walks the corridor: by the ceremony's own logic, the sign of God's presence passing between the pieces signifies that God binds himself alone under the covenant curse, and the Christian tradition, reading this night in the light of the cross, has seen God taking on himself the curse for both sides. Let the room sit in silence with that for a moment before moving on. Then leave the question hanging, unanswered, deliberately: if the human side breaks this covenant, and it will, what happens to the God who swore?

Build, Then Press | "The Promises Were Earthly: Land and Descendants, Nothing More"

Give this reading its full strength; versions of it are held by serious dispensationalist interpreters and by skeptical scholars alike. Genesis 15:18 defines the covenant grant precisely: "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." Real acreage, mapped by rivers, to biological descendants. On this reading, spiritualizing the promise into heaven, the Church, or Christ is a later retrofit that dissolves what the text plainly says; the honest exegete keeps the promise as earthly as God stated it.

7. Respect the strength here: the land promise is real, and the Church does not treat the Old Testament as a code to be dissolved. But press two witnesses. First, Paul in Romans 4:13: what does he say Abraham was promised to inherit? Second, Hebrews 11:9 to 10 and 11:16: while Abraham was living in the land of promise, what does it say he was actually looking for?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Romans 4:13 says the promise to Abraham and his descendants was "that they should inherit the world," not a strip between two rivers. Hebrews says Abraham lived in the promised land "as in a foreign land," looking forward to "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," desiring "a better country, that is, a heavenly one." So the New Testament does not shrink the promise; it explodes it. The land was real and really given (Joshua 21:43 to 45), the way an engagement ring is really given: true in itself, and true as the pledge of something incomparably larger. Type and fulfillment, both/and. The steelman is right that we must not dissolve the earthly promise; it errs by capping the promise at its down payment. And Galatians 3:8 seals it: the third promise, blessing for all nations, is what Scripture calls "the gospel, beforehand."

DIG DEEPER The Priest King with Bread and Wine

One chapter before the cutting ceremony, a strange figure crosses Abram's path: Melchizedek, king of Salem (the future Jeru-salem), "priest of God Most High," who brings out bread and wine and blesses Abram, and to whom Abram gives a tenth of everything (Genesis 14:18 to 20). He appears from nowhere, no genealogy, no death notice, and vanishes. Psalm 110:4 later swears that the Messiah will be "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," and Hebrews 7 builds an entire theology on him. A royal priest of Salem, offering bread and wine, greater than Abraham: keep him in your pocket. He is not done with this study.

8. Step back and put the night together. Abram asked, "How am I to know?" What is God's full answer, and what does it reveal about the difference between how humans secure promises and how God does?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God's answer to "how can I know" is not an argument but an oath sworn in blood, with God alone bearing its curse. Humans secure promises by distributing risk: contracts, collateral, penalties for the other side. God secures his promise by absorbing all the risk himself: Abram sleeps, God walks. Hebrews 6:13, 17 to 18 says it outright: since God could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself, "two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false," so that we might have "strong encouragement." Our hope is not that we hold on to God well, but that God has sworn on his own life to hold on to us.

SEND | TAKING IT OUT

S1. Abram's faith and his honest questions lived in the same heart ("How am I to know?"). What question are you currently carrying that you have been afraid to ask God directly? What would asking it in prayer this week look like?

S2. God secured his promise by taking the whole risk himself. Where in your life are you still living contract style with God, hedging, keeping collateral, insuring against him? What is one hedge you could surrender this week?

Live It This Week

- One clear night this week, physically go outside and look at the stars for five minutes. Pray one line: "Lord, you kept your word to Abram; I trust you to keep it to me."
- Write your hardest honest question to God on a card and put it in your Bible at Genesis 15. Ask it in prayer once a day this week; Abram shows that covenant faith asks.
- Before next session, read Genesis 17:1 to 14 and Genesis 22:1 to 19. In chapter 17, watch for a sentence in which God says what he will be to Abraham's family. In chapter 22, note every detail about the wood, the mountain, and who carries what.

Closing Prayer

Father, when Abram asked how he could know, you did not hand him an argument; you walked the corridor of blood alone while he slept. We sleep too, Lord, and doubt, and hedge, and you keep walking. Hold us in the oath you swore by your own self, and when we cannot see the road, let us at least count the stars. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Genesis 15:6 (RSV2CE)

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LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order of use. Mark these in your Bible before the group arrives.

Core Passages (in order of use)

- Genesis 11:27 to 32, Babel's aftermath; Sarai's barrenness
- Genesis 12:1 to 3, the three promises (write them down)
- Genesis 15:1 to 6, the complaint, the stars, faith reckoned as righteousness
- Genesis 15:7 to 11, the animals cut, the corridor, the birds of prey
- Jeremiah 34:18 to 20, the ceremony decoded (live discovery)
- Genesis 15:12 and 15:17 to 18, the deep sleep; the fire pot and torch pass alone (live discovery)
- Romans 4:13 and Hebrews 11:9 to 10, 16, the promise widened (steelman)
- Hebrews 6:13, 17 to 18, God swore by himself; two unchangeable things

Supporting Passages

- Genesis 12:5, the clan; and 12:8, the altar in the hill country
- Genesis 14:18 to 20, Melchizedek, bread and wine (Dig Deeper)
- Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 7, a priest for ever (leader background)
- Galatians 3:8, the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham
- Galatians 3:16 and 3:29, the singular seed; heirs according to promise
- Joshua 21:43 to 45, the land promise kept in its own order
- James 2:21 to 23, Genesis 15:6 fulfilled on Moriah (next session; leader only)
- Galatians 3:13, became a curse for us (resolution of the fire pot thread; leader only, do not preview)