CHAPTER TWO:
ABRAHAM,
ISAAC, JACOB,
AND JOSEPH
Covenant

“On that day, Yahweh cut covenant with Abram . . .” Genesis 15:18

Ground Rules
Before we can go any further with the story of Abram, we have to consider a major Biblical theme: the concept of Covenant. Already in the story of Noah, we saw God entering into a covenant with His creation. How does that work? How does the Almighty God obligate Himself to sinful people? What role do the people have to play?

First of all, whenever we see the concept of covenant in Scripture, it is clear that God is taking the initiative. You never get a prophet going to God and saying, “Let’s make a deal!” There’s never a king of Israel that says, “Hey! I’ve got a good idea! Let’s cut a covenant with the Almighty!” God comes to His creatures in grace.

The second thing we consistently see with covenants is that they include the promises of God. When God comes to cut covenant, He always has promises on His lips. God took the initiative; He chose Noah. And God made promises: “I will save you and your family.”

And Noah was given a response. We already looked at how Noah couldn’t take credit for the Ark, and yet, without his obedient response, Noah would have been all wet. The response can’t elicit God’s initiative or God’s promises, but a lack of response can refuse the covenant promises and put you outside of the blessings of God.

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What’s Wrong With This Picture?
Here are three common misconceptions about the concept of Covenant. How would you respond to these? What Bible passages might you use? Find some ideas on the next page.
1) You get into a covenant with God by your own good works.
2) You get in by grace, but you have to stay in by works.
3) You get in by grace, you stay in by grace, and there is no response required.
What's Wrong With This Picture?

There have been some common misunderstandings about how covenant works in the Bible. Here are the top three and some ideas on how you might respond to them.

1) You get into a covenant with God by your own good works

Somewhere in your growth as a Christian, you probably picked up on these verses from Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” This Faith Alone principle shines through the story of Abram, where we are told: “And [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

2) You get in by grace, you stay in by works.

Of course we get in by grace, but if we don’t live up to God’s standards, if we don’t hold up our end of the bargain, He can revoke His covenant, so it is in some sense up to us, right? Not according to the Bible. Hebrews calls Jesus both the author and the perfector of our faith. Because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, the Holy Spirit both calls us to faith and keeps us in faith. Salvation is by Grace Alone from first to last: “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

3) Get in by grace, stay in by grace, and there is no response required.

So I’m in by grace and the Holy Spirit gets credit for keeping me in faith—so I’ll just do whatever I want, right? Not according to the Bible. “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

We are given a response. And not responding can eventually put you outside of the means of grace. And where there is no grace, you are left with sin and judgment. Noah don’t build the Ark, Noah don’t float.

“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

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Background Check

If you were a royal in the Ancient Near East and you wanted to cut a covenant with someone else, you would meet at a designated time and place. Then you would take an animal or animals and cut them in two, separating the halves to make a kind of aisle. Then you would read the terms of the covenant and walk down that grisly pathway. Basically, you would be saying, “If I break this covenant, may I be like those animals!”

When Yahweh comes to make promises and cut covenant with Abram, it’s not a two-way street. In Genesis 15, Yahweh passes through the halved animals to Abram, Yahweh puts Himself on the line, Yahweh says, “Rather than break this covenant, I would become like these animals.”

And when the descendents of Abraham persist in their unbelief, when the promise of blessing to all nations is in jeopardy, when the covenant seems doomed to fail, what does Yahweh do? What does He do but wrap Himself in human flesh, take up the sins of the whole world, stretch out His arms on an instrument of execution, and become like those animals?

The cross is the price of the covenant with Abraham, through whom all the nations of the earth because of the cross become blessed. It’s a price Yahweh was willing to pay … for you.

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OT Interview

For more on how covenants were made and kept (or broken) in the Ancient Near East, see the interview with Dr. Reed Lessing on page ???
ABRAHAM

Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac

Yahweh’s covenant promises to Abram were three-fold. They included Land, Offspring, and the Blessing of the Nations. Abraham received these promises by faith, yet all of these promises were jeopardized by the fact that Abram and Sarai in their old age had no children. Abram asks God how His promises could be fulfilled if a distant relative was Abram’s heir apparent. God clarifies his promise: a child from your own body will be your heir.

So it happens that, ten years after Abram abandoned his homeland of Ur at God’s command, Sarai, who has been barren her entire life, comes up with a good idea to help God out. She suggests that Abram take her handmaiden, Hagar, and have a child with her.

Now, at a time when the child of a slave girl could be taken and placed on the lap of her mistress and adopted as hers, this was not that unusual of a suggestion. But it was an attempt to take their future into their own hands. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Abram’s first-born.

But Yahweh makes His promise even more explicit: Sarai will have a son that you will name Isaac. Because Ishmael is your son, he, too, will have many children and become the father of a great nation, but the covenant will be established through Isaac. Abraham is too old, Sarah has always been barren, and when they are no longer able to do anything for themselves, God steps in and fulfills His promises. The message is clear: God is the initiator, God is the actor, God does things that can’t be done, and his people can only sit by and laugh for joy.

The Seal of the Covenant: Circumcision

When Ishmael was seven and not long before Isaac was born, God commanded Abraham to circumcise every male in his household, and Abraham obeyed. This response to God’s promises was to be a seal and physical sign of the covenant. For Abraham, it was a step of faith.

Later in Genesis, we read of two of Abraham’s grandsons who avenged the rape of their sister by tricking an entire city. They said that their women could inter-marry with these foreign men, but only if the men were circumcised. The wealth of the tribes of Israel was so appealing, that the entire city went along with the idea. Three days later, while they were still in pain, all of the men of the city were killed by just two Israelites.

For Abraham as a wealthy nomad in foreign territory to circumcise all of his watchmen, shepherds, security guards and football players at the same time was a concrete sign of his trust in God’s promises, power, and protection.

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Hagar ←———→ Abraham ←———→ Sarah

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Ishmael  Isaac

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Genesis 34
ISAAC

The Sacrifice of Isaac

It just doesn’t make sense. After all God had done for Abraham, after all God had promised Abraham, God tells him to take Isaac, this miracle child of promise, and sacrifice him on a mountain designated by God. How could this be? What’s going on?

Abraham had faith in God’s explicit promise that Isaac would be his heir. Faith in the promise of God allowed him to go forward, even when the command seemed to contradict the promise. The book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham figured God could raise the dead in order to fulfill his promise. So Abraham took what he knew about God and His promises and clung to that when God’s command didn’t make sense.

“Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me,” Yahweh says to Abraham. The Hebrew verb yadah, to know, here and elsewhere carries the weight not only of head knowledge, but of experience. Now I have seen it in action, I have the evidence, I have lived through the ordeal, now I know. Yahweh—and Abraham—now have evidence of faith that trusts in God above all things. And God provides the sacrifice, offers the way out, substitutes a lamb for the life of a son.

Type Alert

Typology is an inner continuity of Scripture, where themes, events, and people are read in light of each other. Like any good book or movie, the Bible picks up on images and themes and intertwines them, relating one set of events to another.

In Colossians 2, we read that the Old Testament institutions are like a shadow, hinting at the real body, Who is Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, therefore we see Christ in, with, and under Old Testament people and events.

The Sacrifice of Isaac is a good example. Here, a son of promise carries the wood of his sacrifice on his back up the mountain of God and God Himself provides the offering. That mountain, Moriah, is the place where the temple would later be built, in the shadow of which the Son of Promise would carry a wooden cross on His back, and Himself be the Lamb provided for sacrifice. Isaac is a type of Christ. The sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 prefigures the events of the cross.

It’s not that Isaac stands for Jesus, but that Jesus is like Isaac, only better. After a three-day journey, Isaac is figuratively brought back from the dead. After three days, Jesus is literally raised to life. The basic themes of God’s salvation are present throughout the history of His people. They are brought to their fulfillment in the person of Jesus and consummated finally when He comes again.

A Wife for Isaac

When Sarah dies, Abraham purchases a tomb—the only piece of the Promised Land he will ever own in his lifetime—and then he sets about getting a wife for his son. He doesn’t want Isaac to marry into the Canaanite culture and be assimilated, so Abraham sends a servant back to where his extended family is living. Laban is the grandson of Abraham’s brother, and Laban has a sister, Rebekah. She agrees to go back with Abraham’s servant to become Isaac’s wife, and the mother of Essau and Jacob.

Later, when her favorite son Jacob gets in trouble at home, Rebekah sends him back to her family in NW Mesopotamia at Haran in Padan Arram (which is why Jacob can be called a wandering Aramean), where he will end up marrying two daughters of his Uncle Laban.
Great Expectations

“You’re pulling my leg!” In Hebrew, the idiom is much the same, only its my heel, not my leg. So when the younger twin comes out pulling his brother’s leg, clasping his heel, he is appropriately called, “Jacob—Heel-puller—Deceiver.” And Jacob lives up to his name.

First, he obtains the birthright blessing from his older brother, Essau, at the rock bottom price of a bowl of soup. Then, with help from his plotting mother, he tricks his old father into giving him the blessing of the first-born.

In order to escape the murderous rage of his hunter brother, Jacob gets out of Dodge. He is homeless, penny-less, on the lamb, and headed for a country without an extradition treaty with Canaan, off to some long-lost relations he’s never met.

At this low-point in Jacob’s life, Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Isaac, makes Himself also the God of Jacob. The covenant promises made to Abraham are repeated to Jacob as he sleeps under the stars with a field stone for a pillow. We don’t climb Jacob’s ladder; rather, the ladder comes from heaven down to earth and God Himself steps into human history once again. Jacob, the Deceiver, is an unworthy sinner—an unworthy sinner touched by the promise and grace of God. When he awakes, he turns his pillow into an altar and names the place “Beth-El,” the House of God.

**What’s in a Name?**

After God promised an Offspring from her body who would crush the Serpents head, Adam named his wife Eve (Mother of All the Living).

Abram (Exalted Father) gets his name changed to Abraham (Father of Many) because God said he would be the father of many nations.

Isaac (Laughter) is a double-entendre: at first, his parents laughed at the outrageous promise of God, but they laughed for joy when the promise was fulfilled.

Essau (Hairy) and Edom (Red) are names for the same guy, father of the Edomites, while his brother Jacob (Heel-puller, or Deceiver) lives up to his name. Jacob’s name is changed to Israel (Contends With God) after he refuses to release the Angel of Yahweh without being blessed. Throw in Stands With A Fist and Dances With Wolves and you could make a movie!

Turn About is Fair Play?

It’s like someone hit the Undo button—the second part of Jacob’s life seems to turn the first part upside-down. First, the Deceiver is deceived in a feat of literary irony: Laban, his uncle, pulls the old switch-the-ugly-sister-for-the-young-one-at-the-altar trick and gets Jacob to work an extra seven years so he can marry the woman of his dreams. After arriving in Haran without a cent to his name, God blesses Jacob during his years with Laban with

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enormous wealth in livestock. When he finally does return home, the brother who had sworn to kill him greets him with a kiss.

In the mean time, this only child has been at the center of a family arms race. The wife he didn’t want to marry is the one having babies, to the great dismay of wife #2. She takes a page out of Sarah’s playbook and gives her handmaiden to Jacob as a wife. When handmaiden #2 starts having babies, wife #1 stops, wife #1 panics and sends her handmaiden in as a sub. Handmaiden #1 has some kids, wife #1 has some more, and eventually, wife #2 (Jacob’s favorite) finally has two sons of her own. All told, of Jacob’s twelve sons, six were from Leah (the elder), two were from Rachel (his favorite), and four were from their two household servants. Who said being a patriarch was going to be easy?

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JOSEPH

Teacher's Pet

So Joseph was the first son of Jacob’s favorite wife. No wonder he was shamelessly favored by his father and so disliked by his brothers. Remember the coat of many colors? Of course, Joseph didn’t help any by flaunting these dreams of his—dreams in which all of his brothers, and even his parents, bowed down to him. There was trouble brewing …

Down to Egypt

It wasn’t really a very merciful thing to sell Joseph into slavery instead of killing him outright. Father Jacob, the Deceiver, is deceived once more when the brothers bring back a bloody coat and claim Joseph was killed by wild beasts.

But even in all the evil things that happened to Joseph, God’s hand was mysteriously at work. In Egypt, Joseph eventually became Pharaoh’s right hand man because of his God-given ability to interpret dreams. God used Joseph to prepare huge stockpiles of grain in the land of Egypt for seven years of famine, a famine so severe that even Joseph’s family in Canaan had to send the brothers down to try and buy grain.

Joseph recognized God’s hand in his life and tells his brothers: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” So Joseph moves the whole family down to Egypt. When Jacob dies, Joseph takes him home and buries him in Abraham’s tomb. And so Genesis ends with God’s people living down in Egypt, still owning only a burial plot in the Promised Land. The stage is set for Exodus.

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Follow the Promise

It's not Adam’s first-born son that carries the line; it is Seth. After Abram is chosen out of all the nations of the earth, the promise is given not to his apparent heir, Eleazor of Damascus, nor to his first-born son, Ishmael. No, it is the son of his barren wife Sarah that receives the promise and then passes the blessing on not to the stronger and elder Essau, but to Jacob. When Jacob blesses his twelve sons, the Messianic line runs not through the eldest, Reuben, nor through the most successful and beloved, Joseph, but goes to the fourth-born, Judah. All throughout Genesis the message is the same: God does not act according to human expectation. He acts according to His grace.
Fire Starters
After reading Genesis 28, sing LW

Web Extensions
For updates and links to the following resources, visit www.csl.edu/OTContent.

Check out images of the Egyptian sun god Re at www.???.???
See a 3-D model of the Ark at www.???.???
View an artist’s take on the Tower of Babel at www.
The Babelites aren’t the only ones who had “high” hopes. Read the story of Larry and the Flying Lawn Chair at www.darwinawards.com/???

Test Takers
Know anything underlined in the chapter and the following:
Who Melchizedek was and what Abram gave him.

Know the basic story of Sodom and Gomorrah—why they were destroyed, the terms of Abraham’s prayer, and what happened to Lot and his family.

OT Interview
For more on Sodom and Gomorrah and the paradox of a Changeless God who hears prayer, see the interview with Dr. Joel Okamoto on page ???

After you have reviewed the material, visit www.csl.edu/OTContent and take the on-line Quiz for chapter one.

For Further Reading
Day 1: Genesis 1-2
Day 2: Genesis 3-5
Day 3: Genesis 6-9
Day 4: Genesis 10-12
Day 5: Genesis 13-14
Day 6: Genesis 15

Test Takers read Genesis 1-25.