



WHOLEHEARTED BIBLE READING PLAN

God of Promise: The Story of Abraham & Sarah

Genesis 12-22

In this 4-week Bible reading plan, we'll learn about God's covenant promises to His people as we study the lives of Abraham and Sarah. We'll look at times they seemed to wholeheartedly trust God, times they failed to do so, and how their story ultimately points to God's promises being fulfilled through Jesus. This plan is designed to go at your own pace as you decide how much to read any day during the week. You can use the plan on your own, or even better, ask a friend to do it with you!

- **Each week covers about 3 chapters from Genesis, plus occasional New Testament passages for deeper exploration.**
- **Reflection questions for each chapter are designed to help you think through the text for understanding.**
- **Application questions in bold help you think about how what you're reading can impact your life.**

Our hope is that in 4 weeks you will have a greater understanding of God's great faithfulness to His people, and how that motivates us to want to be wholeheartedly devoted to Him!

WEEK 1: GENESIS 12 - 14

Context: Where Are We in the Story?

Before you begin studying any portion of the Bible, it's important to look at the surrounding context to help avoid misunderstandings or false ideas. So we'll start with a broad overview of what's been happening in Genesis in the chapters prior to the focus of this Bible reading plan - Genesis chapters 12-22.

Genesis 1:1 opens with the famous words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Chapters 1 and 2 expand upon this story of God's creation, and particularly detail the creation of man and woman. We read that they are created "in the image of God", a status indicating that all humans have special value and dignity over everything else in all of creation. God gave the first humans, Adam and Eve, one command: "You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:16-17) As we know, falling prey to Satan's deception, they failed to obey and ate from the forbidden tree. The consequence of their rebellion is tragic: death (spiritually and physically). Genesis 3-6 details sin's impact on the world, resulting in the downward spiral of humankind acting in opposition to God. The world was so corrupted by sin that God flooded the earth to destroy all but Noah and his family (Genesis 7-9).

Even after the flood, sin continues to corrupt the hearts of mankind, but before the foundation of the world, God had a plan to bring restoration to His creation. Back in Genesis 3, we see a glimpse of God's promise that one day, an offspring of Eve would crush Satan's head. There's hope in this promise of Satan's defeat, but how it will happen is still shrouded in mystery at this point in the story. Abram (before his name was changed to Abraham) enters the scene in Genesis 11 where we learn that he was a descendant of Noah's son Shem. As we study Abraham and Sarah over the next few weeks, we'll see glimpses of how these descendants of Adam and Eve fit into the story of the promised seed, who will crush the serpent's head and be a blessing to the whole world. Let's get started!

Read GENESIS 11:26-32 (skim vs. 10-25 for context, if desired)

- Reading long lists of names in the Bible can be boring and feel unimportant if we're honest. Why do you think God's Word includes these long genealogies?
- What do you learn about Abram from verses 26-32?

Read GENESIS 12

- Genesis 12 is a key passage for understanding the story of redemption woven throughout the Bible. What did God promise Abram? What were God's instructions to Abram?
- Looking at the whole chapter, how would you describe Abram's actions? What did he do that was right? What did he do that was wrong?
- Abram displayed great faith in God's promises by leaving his homeland, at the age of 75 for that matter! Our temptation to view Abram as perfectly "wholehearted" in his trust of God soon fades as we learn about his deception regarding his wife.

APPLY THE STORY: Do you find it easy to trust God in some areas of your life, more than others? In what areas are you tempted to not trust God and try to take matters into your own hands?

Read GENESIS 13

- Why did Abram and his nephew Lot need to separate? Even though Lot chose his portion of land, how do you see God's sovereign hand in where Lot and Abram each settled?
- What did God promise Abram in verses 14-17? How does this promise expand upon the promises we read about in chapter 12?

APPLY THE STORY: When faced with important decisions, how can you find hope in knowing God is in control?

Read GENESIS 14

- What does Abram's reaction to the news of Lot's capture say about his love for him?
- Chapter 13 indicates that Abram and Lot separated in order to prevent quarreling, yet in chapter 14, Abram takes immense measures to rescue Lot. How are his actions a glimpse of God's sacrificial love toward us?
- In verses 18-20, we read about a mysterious character named Melchizedek. His name means "king of righteousness". There's some debate about who exactly Melchizedek is, but we do know he was the king of Salem and a priest of the Most High God. What similarities do you notice between the description of Melchizedek and Jesus? Do you notice any ways the interaction between Abram and Melchizedek points to Jesus? When reading the Old Testament, do you typically look for ways it points to Jesus?

APPLY THE STORY: How can you show sacrificial love to those who can't pay you back or maybe even quarreled with you in the past?

WEEK 2: GENESIS 15 - 17

What's the Significance of Covenants in the Bible?

Although the term “covenant” is not commonly used today, the Bible details several covenants between God and people that are important for understanding God’s plan of redemption throughout the Old and New Testaments. So, what exactly is a covenant? Bibleproject.com defines a covenant as “a relationship between two partners who make binding promises to each other and work together to reach a common goal. They’re often accompanied by oaths, signs, and ceremonies. Covenants define obligations and commitments, but they are different from a contract because they are relational and personal.”

Scripture records both conditional and unconditional covenants that God makes with people. In a conditional covenant, both parties are obligated to fulfill their side of the agreement. When God makes an unconditional covenant with people, the promise will be fulfilled regardless of the behavior of the people on the receiving end. The book of Genesis contains some key covenants for understanding the storyline of the Bible: The Adamic Covenant (God gives mankind responsibility and consequences; God also promises Satan’s defeat), the Noahic Covenant (God’s unconditional promise to never destroy the earth again through a flood), and the Abrahamic Covenant (God’s promise of land, descendants, blessing, and redemption) which we’ll look at in further detail this week.

Read GENESIS 15

We first read about God’s covenant with Abram back in Genesis 12. Today we’ll learn more about that and the ceremony in which God confirms this unconditional covenant with Abram.

- What new information do you learn about God’s covenant with Abram in chapter 15?
- What was credited to Abram in response to God (v.6)?
- To be righteous is to be guiltless of sin before God, and therefore able to have a relationship with Him. However, Romans 3:10 says, “There is no one righteous, not even one...” If no one is righteous by God’s perfect standard, how could Abram be declared righteous?
- Did Abram/Abraham do anything to earn this righteous standing? Read Romans 4 to see how the apostle Paul addresses this question. According to Romans 4:21-25, how can unrighteous people like us be credited as righteous before God?
- Even though Abram “believed God”, he still asked for confirmation that God would fulfill His promises? How did God respond to this request?
- God’s response involves what seems to us to be a strange ceremony to confirm the covenant. This ceremony is filled with symbolism that confirms God’s unconditional promise to fulfill the covenant. Due to our cultural context, we may not understand the significance of these ceremonial elements, but the idea is not as foreign as it may seem. Can you think of modern day ceremonies and symbols that we use to confirm promises? How do these reinforce the serious nature of covenant promises?

APPLY THE STORY: If you have repented and received Jesus as your Savior through faith, you are part of God’s covenant family! How does knowing the seriousness of God’s covenant promises help you approach your relationship with Jesus with a “wholehearted” mindset?

Read GENESIS 16

- We first read about Abram's wife, Sarai, in Genesis 11:29-31. What do we learn about her from that passage?
- In Genesis 12, we read about Abram's deceit regarding Sarai being his wife due to his fear of man. In today's reading, it seems Sarai decides it's time for her to "help" God fulfill His promise to give Abram descendants. What was Sarai's plan, and how did she respond when her plan seemed to work?
- The Lord shows compassion toward Hagar after she was mistreated by Sarai. How did He comfort her? What was Hagar's response to the Lord?

APPLY THE STORY: Jeremiah 17:9 says "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" How is this verse illustrated in Sarah's attitude in Genesis 16? Have you seen how you've been deceived before by your own heart?

Read GENESIS 17

Sometimes long periods of time are covered in brief portions of Scripture, so it's easy to lose sight of how much time passed between events. Taking note of time indicators is a great Bible study tool that enriches our understanding of stories. One helpful way to keep track is by marking time references in your Bible, such as age, years, generations, etc. When reading about Abram, marking time helps us better understand why he and Sarai felt the need to sometimes take matters in their own hands. Here's a brief timeline of events we've read about so far in Abram's life:

- In Genesis 12, we learn Abram was 75 when he left Haran.
- In Genesis 16, we learn Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born (11 years after the promise a great nation would come through him).
- In Genesis 17, we learn that Abram was 99 and Ishmael was 13 when God told him the son of the promise was not Ishmael and that he would come through Sarai/Sarah.
- How does understanding the long wait for Abram to see God's promise fulfilled impact your perspective of the story? How can trust in God be exercised during times of waiting in your life?
- Covenant appears again in chapter 17. This time, God tells Abram to circumcise all males belonging to his household as a sign of the covenant He made with Abram. Thinking back to the promise of numerous descendants, why do you think God demanded this physical sign as a symbol for His covenant people?

APPLY THE STORY: After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, God's covenant people are identified with a new symbol: a "circumcised heart" by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a "seal" given to those who have trusted Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14), making them part of Abraham's family by faith. It's only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to live as "wholehearted" followers of Jesus. How can you rely on the Spirit's power to live this way?

In chapter 17, we read that God gives Abram and Sarai new names: Abraham and Sarah. What is the significance of receiving their new names? What personal change could you list that has occurred in you since becoming a follower of Jesus? How does this relate to our new identity in Christ?

WEEK 3: GENESIS 18 - 20

Understanding God's Mercy & Judgment

Throughout the Bible, we see that God is both just and merciful. His mercy extends to those who call on Him, but there is judgment for those who defy him. In Psalm 145:17-20, King David describes God this way: "The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all his acts. The Lord is near all who call out to him, all who call out to him with integrity. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry for help and saves them. The Lord guards all those who love him, but he destroys all the wicked." As you read this week's passages, take note of the ways God's mercy and judgment is demonstrated.

Read GENESIS 18

- Genesis 18 begins with three mysterious visitors appearing to Abraham at his tent. How does Abraham treat these visitors?
- What does verse 10 indicate about the identity of one of the visitors? What does he say will happen?
- In verses 12-15, how does Sarah's reaction indicate unbelief in God's promise?
- According to verse 19, for what purpose did God choose Abraham?
- How did Abraham respond to hearing about the Lord's impending judgment on Sodom? What do his pleas say about his compassion for Lot? How did the Lord respond to Abraham's pleas?

APPLY THE STORY: Do you feel the same kind of compassion Abram felt for Lot for people who will face God's judgment because they have rejected Jesus? What would it look like for you to plead to the Lord on their behalf?

Read GENESIS 19

The wickedness of the men of Sodom was demonstrated in their demand to have sex with Lot's male visitors. Their request was evil, but so was Lot's offer to give his daughters instead. Just because an action is recorded in the Bible, it does not mean that it is endorsed by God. Keeping this in mind, it's important to recognize the difference between what is prescriptive in the Bible (how God tells us to act) vs. what is descriptive (a record of what happened, right or wrong). Human sinfulness is on full display throughout the Bible, demonstrating the truth that "no one is righteous", and, like the inhabitants of Sodom, we are all deserving of God's wrath. This realization should not lead to despair, because the Bible also showcases God's incredible grace in His forgiveness of sinners through Jesus.

GENESIS 19 cont.

- How did Lot treat the angels when they entered Sodom?
- How did the Lord show mercy to Lot in this chapter? On whose account did He rescue Lot?
- The chapter concludes with more bad behavior by Lot and his daughters, further demonstrating that we must be careful to differentiate between prescriptive and descriptive Bible reading. What do their actions suggest about how they were influenced by the sinful culture of Sodom? Do you see parallels to ways sinful actions are justified in our culture?

APPLY THE STORY: According to verse 26, what happened to Lot's wife? Are there things that tempt you to look back and desire your old life instead of wholeheartedly embracing your new life in Christ?

Read GENESIS 20

Abraham does it again! Despite God's faithfulness and provision for Abraham shown time and again, Abraham feared he would be killed in the land of Gerar if it was known Sarah is his wife. Although this deceit led King Abimelech to take Sarah into his household, in God's mercy, Abimelech did not touch her.

- What does Abraham's request that Sarah refer to him as her brother and not her husband indicate about his struggle to wholeheartedly trust the Lord?
- How is God's protection over Sarah related to His faithfulness to ensure His covenant is fulfilled?
- Even though Abimelech unwittingly took another man's wife, he still made amends by offering Abraham his possessions and land! In return, Abraham prayed for the wombs of the women in Abimelech's household to be opened, and God responded by healing them. Do you think this exchange connects with God's promise in Genesis 12:3? If so, how?

APPLY THE STORY: In Philippians 1:6, the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." According to this verse, who will ensure believers persevere? How does this assurance relate to God's promise to fulfill His covenants, despite times that we, like Abraham and Sarah, lack wholehearted faith?

WEEK 4: GENESIS 21 - 22

Seeing the Gospel in Genesis

After Jesus' resurrection, the Gospel of Luke records a conversation between two confused disciples who were arguing over recent events. These disciples expressed disappointment of dashed hopes that Jesus would redeem Israel. Jesus joined their conversation along the way, but they did not recognize Him. Eventually, Jesus rebuked them saying, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

In this brief interaction, Jesus is saying that the whole Old Testament (Moses and the Prophets is another way of referring to the Old Testament) is ultimately pointing to Him! With this in mind, take note of the various elements in Abraham's story that point to Jesus, beginning with that long list of names we read in Genesis 11. In Matthew 1, we learn that Jesus would come from Abraham's family line, fulfilling God's covenant promise of blessing the whole world through him. Perhaps one of the clearest images from Abraham's story that foreshadows Jesus appears in Genesis 22, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his promised son. As you read this account, take note of the ways it points to Jesus: the once-for-all sacrifice for those who trust Him.

Read GENESIS 21

- What seemed impossible for Abraham and Sarah finally came true in the birth of Isaac! According to verse 2, who was in control of the timing of Isaac's birth?
- How is Abraham's obedience demonstrated in verse 4?
- In chapter 21, we read again about tension between Sarah and Hagar. How did Abraham demonstrate trust in God in letting Ishmael go, even though it was difficult? Can you relate?
- How did God show compassion to Hagar and Ishmael after they were sent away? How was this a fulfillment of God's promise in Genesis 17:20?
- According to verse 22, what did Abimelech notice about God's presence in Abraham's life? What might Abimelech's desire to make a covenant with Abraham indicate about his recognition of God's hand in Abraham's life?

APPLY THE STORY: Whether in good times or bad, do people notice your dependence on God?

Read GENESIS 22

The miraculous birth of Isaac was evidence to Abraham and Sarah that God would fulfill His promise to make a great nation through their offspring. Things seem to be looking up...and then we turn to chapter 22 when God asks Abraham to sacrifice the very son they waited for so long to have - the son who God's promised offspring would come through!

- What did God command in verse 2? How did Abraham respond?
- How does Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrate growth in wholeheartedly trusting the Lord?
- What indicators do we have from the text that Abraham knew God would somehow make a way to keep His promise of providing offspring through Isaac (see Hebrews 11:17-18 for additional insight)?
- The angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, and Abraham saw a ram that God provided to sacrifice instead. What was Abraham's response to God's miraculous provision?
- God provided a substitute sacrifice in the place of Isaac. How does this substitute sacrifice point to the greater once-for-all sacrifice that God the Father provided through Jesus?

APPLY THE STORY: The Bible says that Jesus is the substitute sacrifice for anyone who places their trust in Him for the forgiveness of their sins. Through His death and resurrection, he defeated the power of sin and death brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve. Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham's line who would bless the whole world. Galatians 3:29 says "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise." Have you turned to rely wholeheartedly on Jesus as your substitute, turning away from self-reliance and your own way, so that you can become an heir of the promise in the family of God?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Further explore how the book of Genesis points to Jesus through a Right Now Media video series, "Jesus in All of Genesis." Still need a free Right Now Media Account? Head to [Blackrock.org/resources](https://blackrock.org/resources) to sign up.
- If you would like to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus, or connect with others that can help you grow in your faith, head to [Blackrock.org/faith](https://blackrock.org/faith) for more information.