

BASIC BIBLE THEMES

SESSION 1: COVENANT

TEACHER

Background Scripture: Genesis 15:1-21; 28:15; Psalm 46:1; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Philippians 4:13, 19; Hebrews 13:6; James 1:5

Main Ideas:

- God initiates covenants with His people, and He honors every promise He makes.
- Throughout the Bible, we find that God is always making promises to His people.
- He promises to answer their prayers, comfort the bereaved, guide the searching, pardon the guilty, protect the endangered, enlighten the simple, provide for the needy, and much more.
- God's promises imply a divine plan.
- In His habit of promise-making, God reveals His love for us.

Learning Goals:

- To explore the nature of human promises.
- To understand the character of the promises God makes.

1. Engage Interest

As you read the following promise statements aloud, ask your group to rate, from 1 to 5, their degree of confidence that the promise will be kept. A rating of 1 means "almost no confidence," while 5 is "complete confidence."

- Your best friend promises to take you out to lunch next week.
- A political candidate promises sweeping reforms in government.
- Your child promises to complete a chore you have assigned by the deadline you have specified.
- Your boss promises you a raise or a promotion.
- Your teenager promises to be in by curfew.
- Your supervisor at work promises to put in a good word for you with the big boss.
- A local grocery chain promises lower prices than a competing store.
- Your neighbor promises to keep her children out of your flower beds.

Afterward, ask: What factors determined the level of confidence you felt in these promises?

Presentation Option

Invite your participants to begin thinking about today's topic by discussing the following related questions:

- We often hear the expression, "Get it in writing!" Why do you think we insist on contracts rather than verbal agreements?
- What has changed about the world or about people that makes their verbal promises less trustworthy?
- Do you feel like you can trust people to keep their word without getting agreements in writing? Why?

2. Explore the Word

Invite the group to divide Genesis 15:1-21 into a dialogue in three parts, one for each “character”: a narrator, the Lord, and Abram. Then assign one role to each of three persons or groups, and ask them to read the scriptures aloud dramatically.

After the passage has been read, ask the group to discuss these questions:

- What was Abram’s fear? (vv. 2-3)
- Why do you think having a son as an heir was so important to Abram?
- Do people today feel the same way as Abram? Why?
- What promise did God make to Abram? (vv. 4-5)
- Why do you think that Abram wanted some proof that God’s promise would come true? (v.8)
- What modern actions would be similar to the cutting in half of the animals to “seal” God’s covenant with Abram? (vv.9-18) (e.g., handshakes, embossed official seals, signing papers in front of notary public and witnesses, etc.)
- Why does God initiate such covenants with people? (Because He loves humanity and has their best interests at heart.)

Presentation Option

Invite the adults in your class to read the following scriptures and then discuss the questions that follow:

- Hebrews 7:18-25 (note especially v. 22, “a better covenant”)
- Matthew 26:28
- Mark 14:24
- Luke 22:20

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the Law had been set aside? (v. 18)
- How had the Law failed? (v. 19)
- Why does Jesus have a “permanent priesthood”? (v. 24)
- How is the “permanent priesthood” of Jesus effective for us? (v. 25)

3. Examine Life

First, share the following material with your group. While there are many promises in the Bible that apply to us, including God’s promise of a plan of salvation from sin, the session content states, “Not all of the Bible’s promises are meant for us to claim.” The following ideas are helpful for interpreting and applying scripture promises:

- Carefully read the context of the promise. (Context includes the verses surrounding the actual promise. This may include whole chapters.)
- Ask questions like these:
 - To whom was the promise first made?
 - How universal does this promise sound? Does it seem to include many people or only those to whom it was given?
 - Is the affirmation in this promise repeated in other parts of the Bible?
 - What circumstances affected the first recipients of the promise? How are these similar or different from our circumstances?
 - Do these particular circumstances in any way define the way we should interpret the promise or limit its application? How?

- What cultural factors should we be aware of that might cause us to misinterpret and misapply a promise?
- Are there conditions attached to the fulfillment of the promise? If so, what are they?
- Be aware that God does not fulfill all promises immediately. (Consider, for example, the time it took for God to completely fulfill His promises to Abraham and other biblical characters.)

Second, encourage participants to suggest other interpretive principles they have discovered in their experiences with God and His promises. Point out that there are no “hard and fast” rules for interpreting and applying biblical promises. It appears that for some Christians, God has affirmed biblical promises in ways that seem unusual when measured by generally accepted interpretive principles. In some cases, He has affirmed to a person a promise that has limited application. However, principles such as those described here can help us avoid the “disappointment with God” that sometimes occurs when we have misunderstood the intent of His Word.

Finally, ask the participants to consider each of the following scriptures in light of the above interpretive principles:

- Genesis 28:15
- Psalm 46:1
- 1 Corinthians 10:13
- Philippians 4:13, 19
- Hebrews 13:6
- James 1:5

Presentation Option

Print the words “I promise” in the center of a note card or sheet of paper. Leave space around the words. Ask a volunteer to describe an occasion when someone made and kept a very special promise to him or her. Have the person also write a word or phrase on the card or paper that summarizes the incident. Afterward, the volunteer should pass the card or paper to another person who will tell another story of a promise kept. Anyone who does not want to share an incident can simply pass.

Close the activity by asking these questions:

- What words describe our feelings when we are waiting for a promise to be fulfilled?
- What words describe our feelings when promises are kept?
- What words describe our feelings when promises are broken?

4. Exercise Your Faith

Ask the participants to reread “God the Promise-Maker” and “Conclusion” sections of the Session Content. Then, invite them to identify:

- The most exciting new insight for him or her.
- The statement he or she finds most encouraging spiritually.
- A principle he or she wants to put into practice immediately.

(Option) If you think reading the chapter sections would be too time-consuming, create a list of several key statements and have members respond to them.

Presentation Option

Close by singing a hymn, such as “How Firm a Foundation” (No. 689 in *Sing to the Lord*), that affirms the power of God’s promises to strengthen and help us.