

Get into the Study



5 MINUTES

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, gather some small toys or other objects that represent things that some people fear. Be creative in your choices. Choose some that are serious like spiders or peanuts and some that are silly like horses or brussels sprouts. Then ask **Question #1**.

DISCUSS: **Question #1** on page 92 of the PSG: **“What are some things others might fear that cause you no fear at all?”**



ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Help set the tone for a session about fear by dimming the lights in your meeting space (if possible). Also consider playing a soundtrack of scary (non-offensive) music. Then ask **Question #1**.

SESSION 2

Confidence in the Face of Fear

THE POINT

Trust God when you are overwhelmed with fear.

LIFE CONNECTION

It has been said that true courage is not the absence of fear, but a willingness to act even in the face of fear. The world can be a very dangerous place at times because of sin; however, God calls us to live out our lives in this world. This requires faith in God, that He will be with us and enable us to endure and overcome whatever circumstances we may encounter.

THE PASSAGES

Genesis 12:10-13,17-13:4

THE SETTING

Abram was called by God to go to Canaan, and he obeyed God. However, the Canaanites possessed the land and lived in the most fertile, desirable territory. Abram did what God called him to do, but then faced new challenges. We read in Genesis 12:9 that he “journeyed, going on still toward the south.” The Negev was a parched desert directly to the south of Bethel. Living there could not have been easy, but it was not his final destination, as we will see.

GENESIS 12:10-13

10 And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.

11 And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon:

12 Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.

13 Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.

1 ▶ Verse 10. Abram had set up an altar east of Bethel (Gen. 12:8). He had reached the land where God told him to go. Now he was ready to settle down, but often after a mountaintop comes a valley. Abram now faced two problems. First, the Canaanites had the most fertile land and the best sources of water. Second, **there was a famine in the land.** He had families and animals to feed, so he needed fertile land. However, **the famine was grievous in the land.** He decided it was best to head south **into Egypt.** Where was the Lord amid these difficulties? He was with Abram, but He was testing Abraham's faith. We become confident in faith as we overcome the challenges before us. Growth requires that we are tested.

There is no record that Abram prayed about what to do before going to Egypt, though he only planned to **sojourn there** temporarily, not permanently. It would not be the last time some Israelites would head to Egypt during a famine. Abram was still trusting God while he faced this apparent delay to the fulfillment of God's promise, but he also resorted to deceptive behavior, showing that his faith was far from perfect.

Verse 11. When he was come near to enter into Egypt, he encountered a new fear. He thought his life might be at risk in Egypt because of his wife's beauty. He figured the men would want her and so kill him. Abram had demonstrated great faith in the true God, but he had

GUIDE: Direct group members to "The Bible Meets Life" on page 93 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of trusting God in the face of fear by reading or summarizing the text or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

RECAP: While some fears may seem small, any fear can have a crippling effect. Our minds and bodies can seize up, becoming almost paralyzed. For some, just thinking about it—like imagining that spider crawling on your skin—can fill us with fear. What do we do when the ugly little head of fear begins to creep into our lives? An example from Abram's life shows us what we should do—and what we shouldn't do.

GUIDE: Call attention to "The Point" on page 93 of the PSG: "Trust God when you are overwhelmed with fear."

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking God to help the group understand the importance of walking by faith instead of fear. Thank Him for His Holy Spirit who offers us courage and strength when we need it most.

Study the Bible

Genesis 12:10-13



10 MINUTES

LEADER PACK: Display **Item 7: The Journey of Abraham** poster to give context for the events in these Scripture verses. Point to places and events on the map and time line as they are discussed.



READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 12:10-13 on page 94 of the PSG.

not yet learned to walk in faith consistently. He resorted to trickery with men instead of trust in God to succeed.

Abram said to Sarai, **I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon.** Then he asked his wife to do something deceptive, revealing his lack of trust in God to protect them. Incidentally, Sarai was not a young woman at the time. In Genesis 12:4 we read, “Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.” Genesis 17:17 indicates that Abraham was ten years older than Sarah. At the time of their journey to Egypt, Sarai would have been about sixty-five years old. She may have retained her youthful feminine beauty; however, the same word to refer to Sarai as beautiful is used in Genesis 41:2 to refer to seven healthy-looking cows. At this time in her life, Sarai was probably a striking woman in her countenance, dress, and maturity. As the wife of a wealthy man, she no doubt wore beautiful clothes. Abram knew she would be desirable to those who were influential in the land, and he was right about that.

Verse 12. Abram correctly saw the problem he faced, but he did not ask the Lord what he should do. He believed when the Egyptians saw his wife, they would be willing to kill him so they could obtain his wife and his possessions. While Genesis 1:27 declares that both male and female are made in the image of God, thus indicating they have equal value before God, women were often treated more like property in the ancient Near East. Widows often could not inherit the estates of their deceased husbands. Sarai would be forced into an unwanted marriage and a whole new life.

Abram’s fear for his life was the result of not trusting God. As we noted, there is no indication Abram consulted God before making his decision to go to Egypt, and based on what he did next, we can assume he continued to rely on his own understanding.

Verse 13. Abram’s solution to his predicament was that Sarai should tell the Egyptians she was his sister. The statement would have been technically correct (20:12), but it was still deceptive. He told her, **Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister.** Why did he want her to say this? It was **that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.** How would things go for Sarai if she said that? Did it matter that she might become

another man's wife, another man's property? Abram did not seem to be very concerned about those questions.

If the Egyptians believed Sarai was his sister, then a partnership could be arranged by marriage. Abram was still a man of faith. He continued to believe in the Lord, but he did not seek the Lord. He did not call on the Lord; he let fear rob him of his confidence that God would protect him. God told him to go to a promised land, and Abram did what God told him to do, but it was fear of famine that led him to go to Egypt, and it was fear for his life that led him to give up the wife God had given him. God would still graciously protect him, but Abram would not be a blessing to Pharaoh; instead, he would bring judgment on Pharaoh. Abram also missed seeing how God provides for those who trust Him in difficult situations. Instead, he tried to orchestrate his own rescue. Abram justified his deception by telling himself that Sarai really was his sister; she was the daughter of his father but not the daughter of his mother. However, this wasn't the whole truth. Sarai was also his wife, and he did not want Pharaoh to know that Sarai was his wife because of what could happen to him.

Abram should have trusted God despite his fear, but he didn't. As a result, he would learn a painful lesson. He had remarkable faith to obey God and travel to the promised land, but he needed to mature in his faith. Abram's path to a faith characterized by confidence would go through a valley of fear and result in conflict. ◀

GENESIS 12:17-20

17 And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife.

18 And Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?

19 Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.

20 And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

Verse 17. Pharaoh's officials saw Sarai and took her to Pharaoh. As a result, Pharaoh treated Abram well,

RECAP: A great famine swept across the land of Canaan. God had called Abram to Canaan and made a covenant with him to provide land and offspring; because the famine was so severe, however, fear kicked in and Abram chose to take his family to Egypt. Some would say Abram's survival instinct may have led him to do what he thought was wise, but let's call it what it is: fear. Since God had called Abram to Canaan, surely God would take care of him in Canaan, but fear and uncertainty led Abram to resettle his family down in Egypt.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 96 of the PSG: **"What are some situations that can cause us to fear instead of trusting God?"**

Alternate: When have you seen fear lead to sin?

GUIDE: Use Commentary **1** on pages 97-99 to help explain the background for Abram's plan.

RECAP: Fear and uncertainty strike at all of us. In those moments, we need to remember what Abram seemed to forget: God is with us and He will take care of us. In those moments, we must take our attention off of the fear and focus instead on the Father. Let me state it another way: turn your worry into worship. Reasons to fear will always be around, but we have far more reasons to worship God. When we change our worry to worship and carry our fear to the Father, our perspective becomes clearer—and we'll avoid an unnecessary journey to "Egypt."

TRANSITION: We are to trust God despite fear of circumstances. In the next verses, we see that our fear can affect others.

Study the Bible

Genesis 12:17-20



10 MINUTES

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 12:17-20 on page 96 of the PSG.

and Abram received many material possessions. It was probably at this time that Sarah acquired Hagar, and his wife's ownership of her would later cause relational strife. Also, the great wealth Abram obtained may not have been a blessing, since he and Lot would eventually have to part ways due to their excessive possessions. Trickery can lead to material wealth, but it can also lead to spiritual emptiness and other problems. Sin complicates life. God desired Abram to be a blessing to others, but the deception of Abram would not be a blessing to Pharaoh; rather, it would bring **severe plagues upon Pharaoh and his household.**

We might wonder why Pharaoh was struck by the Lord with **great plagues** when he was not the one who had practiced deception. Pharaoh's desire for Sarai probably was for her to serve as his wife in a diplomatic marriage, a practice that was common in the ancient Near East. Solomon would later form a marriage alliance with the daughter of a Pharaoh for the same purpose (1 Kings 3:1). A marriage between Sarai and Pharaoh would have been a marriage of convenience such that if Pharaoh had Abram's sister as his wife, he could ensure that Abram would be respectful of Pharaoh's authority.

Despite the practices of the day, God's design is monogamy—one man plus one woman in marriage—not polygamy. Pharaoh might not have been dishonest, but it was not God's design for any man to have multiple wives, nor for any woman to have multiple husbands. Whatever Pharaoh understood to be allowable, he went against God's design for marriage. Also, verse 15 says that Sarai "was taken into Pharaoh's house." There is no reason to believe either Sarai or Abram had any choice in this matter. God was not unjust to strike Pharaoh and his household with plagues. God graciously protected Sarai, and Pharaoh returned her to Abram. Sarai was essential to the fulfillment of God's promises in the life of Abram, and God was gracious to both Sarai and Abram despite Abram's foolish resort to trickery. These plagues foreshadowed when the Lord would strike another Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues, and the Israelites would again depart from the land with many possessions.

Verse 18. Moses, generally understood to be the writer of Genesis, did not disclose how Pharaoh determined that

Sarai was the wife of Abram, but she may have told him after the plagues struck. It is also possible that Pharaoh simply figured it out for himself by noting that the timing of the plagues was concurrent with his receiving Sarai. Of course, God could have revealed it to Pharaoh. In any case, Pharaoh realized it was inappropriate for him to have Sarai, and he rightly asked Abram, **Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?**

Verse 19. At this point, things could have gone badly for Abram, but again, God was gracious to him. Pharaoh simply returned Sarai to him and told Abram to leave Egypt. Perhaps Abram needlessly acted in fear earlier by claiming that Sarai was his sister and not his wife. Maybe he had no reason to fear for his life when he entered Egypt.

On the other hand, it could be that Pharaoh realized he could be punished by One greater than himself and chose to send Abram away with all he had given him so he could have relief from the plagues and avoid further judgment. Failure to seek and obey God in the face of fear only leads to trouble, and Abram would now have to leave the country.

Verse 20. The decision to come to Egypt was Abram's choice, but the decision to leave was not his choice. Pharaoh ordered his men to send Abram away, **and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.** Again, God's grace and providence were at work in this event. Pharaoh could have treated Abram very harshly, but he allowed Abram to keep what he had acquired.

God watched over Abram and his family even though Abram relied on his own wisdom instead of trusting God to protect and provide for him. Abram would eventually learn he could trust God in the face of fearful circumstances. This encounter with Pharaoh in Egypt was one of many such lessons that Abram needed to learn that by his faith in God, he could have confidence in the face of fear.

GENESIS 13:1-4

1 And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south.

2 And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.

RECAP: When Abram arrived in Egypt, the beauty of his wife Sarai captured the attention of the palace officials. Sarai went along with her husband's scheme. The officials then raced to Pharaoh with the news that a beautiful new woman was available in his land. Pharaoh was not about to turn down such an opportunity, so he had Sarai brought to his palace. In exchange for Sarai, the Pharaoh lavished Abram with many valuable gifts.

LEADER PACK: Display **Item 8: Fear or Faith?** poster to give group members an opportunity to weigh the consequences associated with living in fear and the benefits associated with living by faith.



DO: Direct group members to complete "Engage" on page 100 of the PSG to help interact with **Item 8.**

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 98 of the PSG: “**How does the enemy use fear to wreak havoc in our lives?**”

Alternate: How can fear affect our witness?

RECAP: Abram might have been a great influence among the Egyptians, pointing them away from their idols toward the one true God. But the opportunity for Abram to exercise any leadership was being dismantled by his fear and lack of faith. The level of our fear and faith today can have a ripple effect on others either for good—or bad. Fear and faith are both highly contagious. When chaos or trouble strikes, or when we have the opportunity to lead or influence others, we should consider how our attitudes and actions will impact them. Am I spreading fear or encouraging faith?

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that we must return to confident trust and worship of God.

3 And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai;

4 Unto the place of the altar, which he had make there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

2 ▶ Verses 1-2. Abram returned to the parched desert called the Negev, yet despite his disobedience to God, God graciously allowed him to not lose his family or possessions. God even increased his possessions so that he became **very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.** Abram likely considered his wealth a great blessing, but his abundance of possessions would soon complicate his life. The pursuit of wealth can become a trap (1 Tim. 6:9). Riches don't last, and our possessions tend to possess us. Abram and Lot would end up with so many possessions they could not stay together (Gen. 13:6), and the addition of Hagar to Abram's entourage would later cause friction between him and Sarai (16:1-6). God continued to test Abram in various ways to grow his faith.

Verse 3. Just as he had traveled by stages to the Negev (12:9), Abram now went back **on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning.** He went back to where he had been before, the site he probably should have never left. However, his journey to Egypt was not without purpose. He had learned to trust God more deeply, and he had learned he had a much greater need for God's guidance than he thought.

Verse 4. Abram returned **unto the place of the altar, which he had make there at the first** and began to call **on the name of the LORD.** God called Abram to this promised land, and there is no indication he should have left it for Egypt. Yes, he would have faced a famine if he had stayed. And, yes, it would have been difficult. But if the Lord wanted him there, He would have provided. Even so, as Abram turned away from following the Lord because he feared famine and feared for his life, God was teaching Abram He could be trusted. Abram had to learn the hard way to stop trusting in himself and put his life in the Lord's very capable hands. These experiences of God's

faithfulness led Abram to worship the Lord anew and call on His name.

The word for *LORD* in this verse is the divine name. It is sometimes referred to as the *tetragrammaton* (Greek for “having four letters”). The divine name pronounced as “Yahweh” or “Yahveh” consists of four Hebrew consonants. It occurs more than six thousand times in the Old Testament, and more than 140 times in the Book of Genesis alone. It is usually understood to mean “the Existing One.”

After the Babylonian exile, the use of the Hebrew word *Elohim*, which can be taken to mean “the living God” and emphasizes His strength and power, was commonly used for God, since the Jews understood that the God they worshiped was the one true God. They also believed the divine name was too sacred to pronounce. Reverence for God’s name is important because it reveals the condition of our hearts toward Him.

An early reference to the God of the Israelites by His divine name outside of the Bible can be found in the Moabite Stone, also known as the *Mesha Stela*. King Mesha was the king of Moab, and the Stela is his account of the battle he had with the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom found in 2 Kings 3. The Moabite Stone dates to around 850 BC.

The divine name likely appears even earlier in Egyptian hieroglyphic texts dated to the late fifteenth century BC. In general, Egyptologists have not denied that the name of Yahweh exists in two New Kingdom inscriptions containing lists of foreign place-names, which are also known as topographical lists. One of the lists is in Soleb at a temple dedicated to the god Amon-Re. It was built around 1400 BC by the Pharaoh Amenhotep III. The other list is from Amarah-West. Both of these locations are in modern-day Sudan. The list at Amarah-West is on a construction made by Rameses II dated to the thirteenth century BC, but many scholars believe the phrase “the land of the Shasu of Yahweh” was copied from the earlier list at Soleb. Most accept the belief that the term Shasu refers to nomads or Bedouin people, primarily to the nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples of Syria-Palestine. So the divine name has appeared outside the Scriptures in such diverse locations as Moab and Sudan. The Lord is God over all the earth.¹

What does it mean to call on the name of the Lord? We may pray silently to God, but there are times we need to cry out to God. Abram was growing in faith, and he realized he needed continually God’s direction in his

Study the Bible

Genesis 13:1-4



15 MINUTES

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 13:1-4 on page 98 of the PSG.

RECAP: After Pharaoh gave the orders to leave and get out of Egypt, Abram took Sarai, his family, and all his possessions and started the journey back into Canaan. What could have been going on in Abram’s mind as he traveled through the dry desert of the Negeb after such a spiritual defeat? We can only speculate of course, but when I think of my own seasons of defeat, I imagine he may have felt insecurity and guilt over his failure.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 100 of the PSG: **“What are some obstacles we face to returning to God after failure?”**

GUIDE: Use Commentary **2** on pages 102-104 to help explain the significance of Abram again calling on the name of the Lord.

RECAP: Abram went back to where he first built his altar: “there Abram called on the name of the LORD.” Perhaps Abram retraced his steps back to that place to show humility, to express remorse for his misconduct, to renew his allegiance, to remind himself of the original promise, to show his gratitude for God’s mercy, or a combination of all these. The important thing is that he understood who he was and who God is. Abram’s act of worship reflects his recognition of the incredible mercy God granted to him instead of the incredible judgment He could have granted.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 100 of the PSG: “**What are some ways our group can help us overcome our fears and failures?**”

Alternate: How does the enemy use our fears to weaken our walk?

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: “**Trust God when you are overwhelmed with fear.**”

life. Upon his return from Egypt, he began to worship God afresh, making sacrifices on the altar and calling on God by His name. He had a personal relationship with a personal God.

Abram would face new challenges in the days ahead. He would have more reasons to be afraid as he sojourned in Canaan. Spiritual battles and military battles were on the horizon, but Abram was learning to trust God when afraid rather than rely on himself. When Abram reverted back to trusting in his own wisdom, God was gracious to him. But God was calling Abram to a deeper faith, a faith that would face dangers with confident trust in God, leading Abram to listen and obey the Lord quickly and carefully. Abram was coming to know that God would always be with him and would enable him to endure and overcome whatever challenges he faced. ◀

1 “The Shiloh Excavations: The Name Yahweh in Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts,” *Associates for Biblical Research*, <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/exodus-era/3233-the-name-yahweh-in-egyptian-hieroglyphic-texts>.

ENGAGE

Consider the following situations. Describe the road of fear and the road of faith in each situation:

Encountering difficult circumstances

Fear:

Faith:

Meeting dangerous people

Fear:

Faith:

Facing personal challenges

Fear:

Faith:

LIVE IT OUT

We are to trust God when we are overwhelmed with fear. Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Reflect.** Be honest. Take some time and ask yourself how your level of faith and level of fear have been affecting you and those around you. Identity a specific fear that you need to focus less on, and then shift that focus more on the Father.
- ▶ **Confess.** Take a quick break and self-evaluate if there are any half-truths that you may be covering up due to fear. Confess it today. Remember concealing keeps you from healing.
- ▶ **Worship.** Search for a list of different names of God that are found in the Scriptures. Take some time and contemplate each title. Allow each name of God to deepen your understanding and fear of Him, while at the same time increasing your faith in His mercy.

Live It Out



5 MINUTES

READ: Direct group members to page 101 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the applications to carry out this week.

Wrap It Up

SUMMARIZE: Read or restate this idea from pages 99-100 of the PSG:

The more we deepen our reverent fear of God, the more our faith and trust in His mercy grows. As we truly understand the depths of God's magnificent power and holiness, the more confident we become—and we are overwhelmed by the heights of His undeserving mercy that He offers to all.

PRAY: Thank God for helping us overcome our fears. Ask Him to help group members share this important truth with others this week.



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Rising in the distance is the site of ancient Gilgal, just west of the Jordan River. Joshua was camped at Gilgal when the Gibeonites came to make a covenant of peace.

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

By Robert D. Bergen

The Bible portrays God as a relationship builder. Time and again, the Lord reached out to people, communicating guidance, promises, and expectations to them. More than that, the God of the Bible shows Himself to be both a promise maker and—more importantly—a promise keeper. Nowhere does the Old Testament present this more powerfully than in God's relationship with Abraham, a man from an idol-worshipping clan in ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) who went on to become the outstanding biblical example of faith in the one true God (see Rom. 4:1-3,9-25).

IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

A formal agreement that defined a relationship between two parties in ancient western Asia was known in ancient Hebrew as a *berith*; that is, a covenant or treaty. An agreement of this type could be used to strengthen a relationship between two close friends (Jonathan and

David; 1 Sam. 18:3) or to end a dispute between two unhappy neighbors (Isaac and Abimelech, Jacob and Laban; Gen. 26:28; 31:44). The agreement could be between a king and his subjects (David and Israel's elders; 2 Sam. 5:3), or between two people groups (Israelites and Gibeonites; Josh. 9:15). It could embody God-given instructions that people were obligated to follow (God with Israel; Ex. 34:10) or express a formal commitment of a group of people to God (Israel and the Lord, 2 Kings 11:17). A covenant could even be between God and non-human aspects of His creation (God and all living beings, God and the earth; Gen. 8:21-22).

Archaeologists have unearthed ancient non-Israelite covenants in the form of cuneiform tablets. These documents, especially those of the Hittite culture found at Alalakh (near Syrian Antioch),² provide evidence of formal agreements that were the equivalents of some types of Israelite covenants of the Old Testament period.

Scholars often divide the Old Testament covenants and treaties into two categories, though I personally prefer to add a third. Those established between two people who had roughly the same amount of social power were called *parity treaties*. Many scholars use the term *suzerainty treaty* to refer to agreements that parties with vastly different amounts of social status made. These included agreements a conquering nation made with those they defeated or that God made with people. My third category includes the formal relationships established between God and people or any other aspect of His creation. Each of these treaty types served different purposes and possessed vastly different characteristics.

Parity treaties—those established between social peers—placed requirements on both parties involved. Arrangements of this type could help clarify details of a relationship between two people (see 1 Sam. 23:17) and establish a framework of clear expectations

for both parties (Gen. 26:29). As a result, both parties could expect to benefit significantly from this relationship. It might take the form of a marriage commitment (Mal. 2:14); a promise to care for another person's family, if needed (1 Sam. 20:8-16); a trade agreement between nations (1 Kings 5:2-12); a mutual assistance treaty between nations (Josh. 9:6-15; 10:6-7); or hiring the services of another nation's military forces (1 Kings 15:18-19). At the time these agreements were established, participants might give gifts (see 1 Sam. 18:4) and share a lavish meal (Gen. 26:30). Biblical examples of this type treaty include agreements reached between Abraham and Abimelech (21:22-32), Isaac and Abimelech (26:26-31), Jacob and his father-in-law Laban (31:44-54), the Israelites and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:6-15), Jonathan and David (1 Sam. 18:3-4; 20:8-17; 23:16-18), David and Abner (2 Sam. 3:12-13), David and Israel's ruling elders (5:1-3), Solomon and Hiram (1 Kings 5:2-12), and King Asa and King Ben-hadad (15:18-19). Clearly, Abraham's covenant with God does not fit into the "parity" category since Abraham could not be expected to provide God with any material or military benefit.

Suzerainty treaties—such as those from Alalakh coming out of the ancient Hittite Kingdom—were agreements that established the conditions for an unequal relationship between two individuals or groups. Conquering kings regularly imposed these on nations they defeated. The party in a position of power would draw up an agreement that provided a disproportionate number of benefits for the victor. These treaties typically contained six distinct elements: (1) a preamble identifying the king who initiated the treaty; (2) a historical prologue providing details of the good things a conquering nation had done for the conquered people and then indicating the conquered nation should be grateful and obedient to the victors; (3) treaty stipulations; (4) a list of gods who supposedly witnessed the treaty; (5) a list

of blessings and curses associated with obeying/disobeying the treaty terms; and (6) guidelines for storing the document as well as publicly reading it at prescribed times in the future.³

In biblical narratives the formal arrangements that conquerors made with those they had defeated are similar in fashion. The victorious nations consistently placed heavy financial burdens on those they had conquered—sometimes with exact numbers regarding the size of annual payments to be made to the conqueror. The victors also took strong measures to enforce their demands (see 2 Kings 3:4-7; 17:3-5).

A third type of *berith* in the Bible describes formal agreements God made with the nation of Israel, with certain individuals, and with nature. Though scholars usually place these agreements in the category of suzerainty treaty, putting them in a separate category is useful. Perhaps an appropriate term for this God-initiated relationship is divine covenant. Divine covenants differ in three significant ways from a classic suzerainty treaty. First and most obviously, they include God as a party in the formal agreement. Second, their purpose was not to impose demands on a conquered group or individual. Third, the benefits directed toward the lesser party—that is, what God offers to the people—far exceed what a conqueror offered in any suzerainty treaty. God-sized blessings are given to people and nature in divine covenants!

GOD'S WITH ABRAHAM

God initiated the covenantal relationship with Abraham. The Bible does not present the covenant as having been concluded in a onetime event. Rather, God clarified the agreement through a series of divine revelations over the course of Abraham's lifetime. Thus, getting a complete view of the divine covenant that God established with Abraham requires examining passages from Genesis 12; 13; 15; 17; 18; and 22.

This unique connection between God and Abraham begins in Genesis 12. Though this chapter does not use the term *berith*, later passages make clear that events recorded here mark the beginning point of one of the most important divine-human relationships in Scripture. The relationship began in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 15:7; see Acts 7:2), some 220 miles southeast of modern Baghdad,⁴ when God broke in to Abraham's life. In a gracious and sovereign act, the Lord communicated a series of authoritative commands and amazing promises to a man born and raised in an idol-worshiping family (Josh. 24:2). The Bible gives no indication Abraham had been seeking any special association with God; the Lord initiated it on His own.

By the time the divine covenant had been fully developed between the Lord and Abraham—a process that took many years to complete—both parties had performed several key actions. First, an initiatory act took place when the Lord summoned Abraham to separate from his idol-worshiping family and go to a place of the Lord's choosing (Gen. 12:1). Second, a formal covenant ceremony took place. The covenant ritual was solemn, mysterious, and of the utmost significance. As part of the ceremony, Abraham slaughtered ritually clean mammals and birds and then separated portions of their corpses into two piles. For His part, the Lord supernaturally caused a smoking firepot and a flaming torch to pass between the divided animals (15:17), thereby obligating Himself to fulfill the terms of the covenant. Third, Abraham and all males associated with him—his slaves and all future descendants—were required to be circumcised as a sign of submission to the terms of the covenant (17:11-14) and acceptance of Yahweh—the Lord—as their God (v. 7). Finally, Abraham had to pass a test confirming his submission to the Lord of the covenant. This test confirmed his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, the key human link in fulfilling core covenant promises (22:9-12).



From Ephesus, relief from a Byzantine banister shows Abraham as he was about to offer Isaac.

As part of the covenant, the Lord made several outstanding promises to Abraham—promises He later fulfilled. Most prominent among these was that Abraham, a married but childless man, would have many descendants. In fact, he would become the father of many nations (12:2; 17:4,16,20) and his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore (15:5; 22:17). More than that, kings and tribal leaders would be among his descendants (17:6,16,20). Though Abraham would have many sons, Sarah’s son Isaac—the first son sired by Abraham after he had taken the covenant sign on his body—would be the primary expression of the divine covenant relationship.

Second in prominence among the covenant promises was that of a homeland. On five occasions (13:14-15; 15:7,18; 17:8; 22:17) the Lord promised Abraham that the land of Canaan, a region stretching “from the brook

of Egypt to the Euphrates River” (15:18, HCSB) would be the lasting possession of his descendants, though it would not be given to them for many years (vv. 13-16).

Third and finally, the Lord would bless Abraham and his descendants (12:2; 22:17). As part of the divine blessing, the Lord would protect Abraham (12:3; 15:1) and make him famous (12:2). God’s covenant with Abraham brought blessings to the patriarch and his progeny, to be sure. But more than that, the divine blessing bestowed on Abraham was extended to all peoples (vv. 2-3) through Abraham’s greatest descendant, Jesus Christ (see Matt. 1:1). 📖

1. As a symbol of their covenant relationship, God changed the patriarch’s name from Abram to Abraham. For the sake of clarity, the article will use Abraham throughout.
2. J. A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 10.
3. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
4. David M. Fleming, “Ur” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1640.

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