

Advent Studies 2009

God's Covenant
with
Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.



Week 2: Abraham

Circumcision becomes the sign of the covenant
(see note box)

Note how often the word 'everlasting' appears (in verses 7, 8, 13, and 19). It may look as though this means that the covenant can never be broken, but what it really means is that God side of the covenant will always be kept as long as humanity keeps its side. Humanity is always able to walk away from the covenant, and thus lose its benefits.

Covenant as 'cutting'

(see Jeremiah chapter 34: verses 18-19)

The formation of a covenant took place when an animal was cut in two, and the people making the covenant passed between the pieces of the animal. Note that in this passage only God passes between them (verse 17).

Why do you think that is?

Circumcision

This was a common practice amongst the neighbours of Israel; noticed that God does not have to explain it to Abraham, but assumes that he knows what it means. But God takes a common, existing practice and makes it sacred within the Community of Faith. It's important to note that circumcision is not the covenant itself, but is a sign of the covenant; it is not enough just to be circumcised.

An extra piece of work

Read through Romans chapter 4, and see what Saint Paul has to say about Abraham and circumcision.

Discussion Questions

1. Do we look for signs in order to help our faith? Should we? Or should we just have faith?
2. How does the covenant with Abraham show us that God's promises are not just to individuals but for a group?
3. A circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant, what is the sign of the New?
4. *"It's important to note that circumcision is not the covenant itself, but is a sign of the covenant; it is not enough just to be circumcised."* What does this tell us about our covenant with God, and how we act as disciples?
5. Abraham could see little hope in the covenant being fulfilled, but acted as though it were true. Does this tell us anything about our life of faith?

Note also in chapter 15:6, that Abraham believes, even without any evidence, that God's promise will come about. It is very hard to believe in promises when times are hard - when the promised scene is so remote. There is nothing in many situations which gives hope to believe.

15:8 - Where is Abraham's faith now, that he has to ask the signs? *Maybe faith and signs need not be separate; even in belief questions can persist.*

What seems to come across very clearly in chapter 15 is that the covenant with Abraham is very similar to the covenant with David, promising a kingship to himself and his descendants. What distinguishes Abraham in this chapter is his faith, that God will do the impossible and bring about descendants.

Chapter 17

First of all note that there is a period of about 13 years between the end of chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 17. During this time the slave Hagar has given birth to Ishmael, but for some reason it becomes clear that Ishmael is not going to be the heir that God promised. So some might ask is chapter 18 another covenant? It seems more likely that it is a revision of the earlier covenant, written from the point of view of the 'P' tradition. Note too some of the differences:

17:1, God reveals himself as "God Almighty" or, in Hebrew, "El Shaddai". These changes in the way that God refers to himself may seem very odd to us, but in many ways they teach us to be open to learning new things about God and new ways of seeing him according to different times in different generations.

God also changes the names of both Abram and Sarai; Abram means 'exalted Father'; Abraham, 'father of a multitude'; Abraham must live up to this new name.

Sarah is as important in the covenant as Abraham; the promises are repeated for her.

What is in a Name?

In many cultures a name is more than just what you would call somebody; it identifies them as a person and as who they are. In some cultures, even today, it is common that the person will keep his name secret so that no one can gain power over him. It is therefore again quite common that a person change their name at significant moments in life. Other examples in the Bible include Jacob, who became Israel; Simon, who became Peter; and Saul who became Paul.

These changes then to the names of Abram and Sarai, to Abraham and Sarah, mark an important change in their lives. The covenant with God changes them completely.

How to Use This Study

These study notes may be used by individuals for private study but will be found to be more effective when used in combination of private study and group discussion. The questions are designed to help you reflect on the text under discussion as you draw from your own personal experiences and listen to the reflections and experiences of others within your group.

Become familiar with the text

Each week there is a passage of Scripture associated with the Covenant that we will be reflecting on for that week. Make sure you have opportunities to read, re-read and reflect upon the text with the assistance of these questions (reproduced each week) before you move on to the commentary provided and the group discussion. The questions to be used for individual reflection are:

- What is the covenant being made?
- Who is the covenant between?
- What can we expect as a result of this covenant?

A Change away from the Sunday Gospel

With the advent studies over the past few years the focus has been to concentrate on the Gospel for each of the Sundays in Advent. This has necessitated either preparing for the Gospel for the Sunday to come or looking back on the previous Sunday's Gospel.

The Culmination of the Advent season in the great Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas) is in itself the celebration of the beginning of the bringing about of God's New Covenant which is sealed in the Death and Resurrection of Our Lord. A further study, for personal reflection or for use as a final group study is provided on this New Covenant.

The setting for the Study

There are no hard rules for this but it is important to ensure that a comfortable and welcoming approach is taken and that those attending are encouraged to bring others along. Notes about the setting and style from the previous Advent studies can be re-visited if you need help.

What is a 'Covenant'?

In Law: It is a contract drawn up by a deed; it can also mean a clause in a contract

In Theology: The word Covenant Speaks of an agreement that brings about a relationship of commitment between God and his people.

Central to the Jewish faith are the Biblical Covenants that God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Alongside these, there is the centrality of the Ark of the Covenant, dating from the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, being carried about under King David and finally being placed in Salomon's great temple. It contained the tablets of the laws of the ancient Israelites.

The phrase Old Covenant is used in Christian theology to describe the covenant between God and Israel as described in the Old Testament.

The phrase New Covenant is used in Christian theology to describe the covenant between God and all humankind made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this series of studies we will look at some of the covenants God made with his people in the old Testament and then look at how these covenants find their fulfilment in Jesus and his church.

More about J, P & E...

Many of you might have noticed that in the old Testament things get repeated, but in different ways, all that the whole emphasis of the story seems to change. Scholars believe that the reason for this is that there are in fact different writers, or at least different traditions of writings. Three of these groups are known as 'J', 'E' and 'P'. (mentioned briefly in *Week One's studies*)

'J' - This group of writers, or traditions, is given the title 'J' because they tend to use the word Yahweh (or incorrectly Jehovah) for God. They often describe God as though he were a man (for instance, in the Garden of Eden God "walks around in the cool of the day.") The 'J' tradition also seem to give a more or less continuous history of the people of Israel from the time of Abraham till they settle in the Promised Land.

'E' – These writers tend to give God the earlier name of 'Elohim' - a name that lasted until about the time of Moses, when the new name 'Yahweh' was revealed. In them, God is much more remote than in the 'J' tradition. He appears to people in dreams (Genesis 20:3; 28:12) and through Angels) (Genesis 22:11-12).

'P' - These writers probably come from a Priestly tradition and take a special interest in the way in which Israelite customs began. They recognize the holiness of God, and everything that distinguishes Him from human beings.

The Covenant with Abraham

The Covenant with Abraham is a pivotal point in Biblical, and therefore Salvation, history. The covenant made with Noah was made with all of humanity, a covenant that said that God will never again seek to destroy everything. The covenant with Abraham, or Abram as he was, is made with a particular person and concerns how God is going act to reconcile a fallen world. It has been said that the first eleven chapters of Genesis describe the problem; chapter 12 of Genesis until the end of the Book of Revelation describes the solution!.

One thing to note right from the start is that although God calls one man, Abram, that call is made on the basis that that one man will begin a people who will number more than the grains of sand by the sea! This is no individualistic promise – it is for all who come after Abram.

Read Genesis chapters 15 and 17

Chapter 15

In the story of Abraham we find that there are two versions of the covenant; the first is in chapter 15:1-21 and the second is in chapter 17. It is worthwhile reading through both, and seeing what are the similarities and what are the differences.

One thing to note is that it's probable that the two passages and written by two different people. Scholars believe that chapter 17 was written by someone often referred to as 'P' while chapter 15 seems to have been written by a combination of writers-often referred to as 'E' and 'J' . (see *previous note about J, P & E*)

It's also worth noting that chapter 15 reflects the later covenant with David. God starts a covenant with Abraham, and it continues with David. Have a look at how the build up to the covenant is similar in both cases:

Action	Abram	David
Election	Gen 12:1-3	1 Sam 16
Deliverance	Gen 12:10-20	2 Sam 5:24-25; 7:1
Faith/Worship	Gen 12:7-8; 13:18	2 Sam 6:15-17
Covenant	Gen 15:18	2 Sam 7

Thus God establishes a covenant with those who have faith; the covenant is not the start of the relationship.

Note: "*the word of the Lord came*" - this is a common phrase in the prophets, it is only used in this place in the Pentateuch. It not only shows the importance of what is said, but also directly links Abraham with the prophets.