

**Gen. 17:1–7, 15–16**

**Ps. 22:23–31**

**Rom. 4:13–25**

**Mark 8:31–38 or**

**Mark 9:2–9**

# Promises Kept

**Goal for  
the Session**

*Adults will examine God's promises to Abraham and identify ways to live in light of God's promises to them.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” W. Sibley Towner

*Everlasting Covenant (17:2–7).* Yahweh now identifies the promise as “my covenant,” a term that emerges throughout chapter 17 as the dominating motif (thirteen uses in 17:2–22 alone). The verses of our pericope describe the covenant as a unilateral gift or grant by God to Abram that he should become “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (v. 4), and that he should become “exceedingly numerous. . . fruitful” (vv. 2, 6). Progeny were necessary if the elect line were to wind like a scarlet thread from the promise of universal blessing in Genesis 12:1–3 down through the entire patriarchal saga and to the end of the Bible. The fact that the covenant is said also to be “everlasting” (v. 7; see also vv. 13, 19) suggests the possibility of entering into a nurturing and right relationship with God was always open.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Husbands

We are to learn that the one who seeks to restore and reconcile humanity by establishing a covenant with Abraham is the *one* true God. Covenant devotion to God requires exclusive worship of and obedience to YHWH. As the drama of the Old Testament demonstrates, the single-minded love and worship of YHWH is a hard-won lesson. All too often, our acts underscore what Hendrikus Berkhof calls an “intensifying and never-ending dialectic” of divine faithfulness and creaturely unfaithfulness.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Craig Kocher

The pastoral gift of Genesis 17 is its reminder that at the center of our being rest blessing and promise, naming and covenant. We are followers of the One who established a never-ending covenant with Abraham and brought that covenant to fullness in Jesus Christ. In our baptism we have been given a new name, “disciple of Jesus,” that tells us everything we need to know about ourselves and everything we need to know about God.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

We do not head straight to Easter from the spa or the shopping mall. Instead, we are invited to spend forty days examining the nature of our own covenant with God. Upon what does that relationship depend? What do we trust to give us life? What concrete practices allow us to become bodily involved with God? If we were to ask God for a new name, what might that name be? What new purpose might that name signify? While Lent focuses naturally on the example of Jesus, Jesus focused just as naturally on the example of Abraham (Matt. 8:11). Like his forebear in faith, Jesus walked toward God's promise with steady trust, leading God to give him a new name too: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Genesis 17:1–7,  
15–16**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Promises are a part of family life. A parent promises to attend a child’s school play or promises to pick the children up from dance lessons. Teenagers promise to clean their rooms. Most people want to be known as people who keep their promises. Yet, sometimes promises are broken. Everyone knows the guilt from breaking a promise and the pain from a promise not kept. Coming from this world of kept and broken promises, participants will find it inspiring to consider that God keeps promises.

*O God of Love, your promises are abundant and unchanging. Move in my life that I may be more aware of your steadfast love, unconditional forgiveness, and overwhelming grace. Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- pens
- paper
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 7, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: board or newsprint, markers, pens, paper
- option 2: pens, paper, construction paper, colored markers or crayons
- option 3: pens, paper, copies of Resource Sheet 1

The Hebrew word *berith*, usually translated “covenant” in English versions of the Bible, is a legal term denoting a formal and legally binding declaration of benefits to be given by one party to another, with or without conditions attached.

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

Welcome the participants and introduce any visitors.

Form pairs and have the participants think about an important promise they made with someone else. Ask them to discuss with their partner:

- ✂ How did that promise affect their relationship?
- ✂ What was the most difficult part of keeping the promise?

Bring the participants back together. While not going into the details, invite volunteers to describe the effects the promise had on their relationship and what the most difficult part of the promise was. When all have had a chance to respond, tell the participants that today’s session examines the promises, or covenants, God makes with God’s people.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

*Gracious God, the pace and demands of our daily lives sometimes blind us to your gracious activity in our lives. As we study your Word, remind us of your love for us and assure us that nothing is able to separate us from that love. Amen.*

### Exploring

Explain to the participants that today’s story of Abraham and Sarah takes place twenty-four years after the Lord first appeared to them. It is thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael. Abraham and Sarah’s journey of faith has been a long one, and it has involved a great deal of waiting.

When God does new things, names change. God's blessings would flow through Abram and Sarai. Their names were changed to symbolize their expanded roles, from "Exalted Father" to "Father of Nations," and from "My (local) Princess" to "Princess (for everyone)."

Have a volunteer read Genesis 17:17–7, 15–16. Inform the participants that God's covenant with Abraham is unilateral and unconditional. Have the participants silently read the focus scripture again. Ask them to identify the parts of the story that demonstrate the unilateral and unconditional characteristics of the covenant.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16). Have a volunteer read the "Where?" excerpt. Ask the participants:

- ✧ What is involved in "exclusive worship of and obedience to YHWH"?
- ✧ How would you describe the "'intensifying and never-ending dialectic' of divine faithfulness and creaturely unfaithfulness"?

Explain that during the time they waited for a son—an heir—Abraham and Sarah demonstrated that they were both faithful and flawed. Distribute pens and paper. Form four groups. Ask each group to explore the passage of Scripture you will assign them and identify how Abraham and Sarah did or did not exhibit faith, and how the Lord acted to keep God's covenant with them. The Bible passages:

- ✧ Genesis 12:4–9
- ✧ Genesis 12:10–20
- ✧ Genesis 16:1–10
- ✧ Genesis 18:9–15

If the group is small, form two groups with each group working on two passages. After a few minutes, bring the group back together and have the participants tell each other what they have discovered. Ask the group:

- ✧ How do these verses illustrate divine faithfulness and creaturely unfaithfulness?
- ✧ What did they learn about God's relationship with humankind?

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (God's Shocking Action) to the participants. Have the participants read it silently. Ask:

- ✧ In what ways is the unilateral nature of God's covenant important for God's people?
- ✧ In what ways is the unconditional nature of God's covenant important?

Transition to Responding by having the participants read the "Now What?" excerpt. Ask the participants:

- ✧ What do you trust to give you life today?
- ✧ What concrete practices allow Christians to become bodily involved with God?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Living in the Covenant** God invites God's children to respond to the covenant that God makes with them. People can choose either to ignore God's covenant with them or to live in its reality. Have the participants brainstorm ideas about how they could respond to God's loving action. Ideas might include: saying grace before meals, cultivating an attitude of gratitude, or increasing their volunteer activities. Write responses on the

EASY  
PREP

board or newsprint. After a list has been developed, ask the participants to select one or two ideas that they will want to incorporate into their lives. Have the participants write their selections on a piece of paper to take home with them.

- 2. A Personal Covenant** Sometimes people have a difficult time comprehending that God makes a covenant with them personally. Distribute pens and paper to the participants. At the top of the paper have the participants write, "Unconditional." Then ask them to imagine God sitting down and making a covenant individually with them. Have them write down what that covenant would say. After God's covenant with them has been written, direct the participants to use the art material on the table to draw a picture of their response to the covenant. When everyone is finished, ask for a few volunteers to read their covenants and display their responses. Encourage the participants to refer to these two items frequently throughout the week.
- 3. Name Change** Refer to the "So What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Have the participants read the excerpt silently. Point out that the author states that at their baptism they have received the new name, "disciple of Jesus." Distribute pens and paper. Form small groups of two or three. Instruct the participants to discuss in their groups what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. Have each group write a meaning or description for the name, "disciple of Jesus." When the groups have finished their task, ask them to share what they have written. Suggest that everyone write down their group's description and take it with them. Encourage them to place it on their bathroom mirror so that they will see it first thing in the morning and the last thing at night.

## CLOSING

Ask participants to identify a way that God has kept God's promise to them. When everyone has had a chance to speak, gather in a circle for prayer.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

*O God of love, thank you for your steadfast love, which has been a part of our lives, even when we have rejected or ignored that love. Thank you for the assurance that your thoughts and actions toward us will never change. Secure in that knowledge, empower us to share your love with those people who are a part of our lives. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 7, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

## Focus on Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” W. Sibley Towner

*Everlasting Covenant (17:2–7).* Yahweh now identifies the promise as “my covenant,” a term that emerges throughout chapter 17 as the dominating motif (thirteen uses in 17:2–22 alone). The verses of our pericope describe the covenant as a unilateral gift or grant by God to Abram that he should become “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (v. 4), and that he should become “exceedingly numerous. . . . fruitful” (vv. 2, 6). Progeny were necessary if the elect line were to wind like a scarlet thread from the promise of universal blessing in Genesis 12:1–3 down through the entire patriarchal saga and to the end of the Bible. The fact that the covenant is said also to be “everlasting” (v. 7; see also vv. 13, 19) suggests the possibility of entering into a nurturing and right relationship with God was always open.

### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Husbands

We are to learn that the one who seeks to restore and reconcile humanity by establishing a covenant with Abraham is the *one* true God. Covenant devotion to God requires exclusive worship of and obedience to YHWH. As the drama of the Old Testament demonstrates, the single-minded love and worship of *YHWH* is a hard-won lesson. All too often, our acts underscore what Hendrikus Berkhof calls an “intensifying and never-ending dialectic” of divine faithfulness and creaturely unfaithfulness.

### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Craig Kocher

The pastoral gift of Genesis 17 is its reminder that at the center of our being rest blessing and promise, naming and covenant. We are followers of the One who established a never-ending covenant with Abraham and brought that covenant to fullness in Jesus Christ. In our baptism we have been given a new name, “disciple of Jesus,” that tells us everything we need to know about ourselves and everything we need to know about God.

### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Barbara Brown Taylor

We do not head straight to Easter from the spa or the shopping mall. Instead, we are invited to spend forty days examining the nature of our own covenant with God. Upon what does that relationship depend? What do we trust to give us life? What concrete practices allow us to become bodily involved with God? If we were to ask God for a new name, what might that name be? What new purpose might that name signify? While Lent focuses naturally on the example of Jesus, Jesus focused just as naturally on the example of Abraham (Matt. 8:11). Like his forebear in faith, Jesus walked toward God’s promise with steady trust, leading God to give him a new name too: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## God's Shocking Action



Covenants are a part of everyday life. Today they are called promises or contracts, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Mortgages and car loans are covenants. Financial commitments made to congregations in response to a stewardship campaign are covenants. Agreements to take a child to soccer practice or pick up the dry cleaning after work are covenants. Covenants are sealed in a variety of ways—a handshake, a text, or several pages of legalese.

There are several covenants in the Bible. The two most important covenants, though, are the Sinai Covenant and the Covenants with Abraham and David.

The Sinai Covenant was conditional. There were consequences in breaking a contract, but one thing that was never destroyed was the Lord's relationship with the people. The prophets declared that the relationship between God and the people was permanent and that breaking the covenant resulted in only a momentary setback in the relationship.

The real shocker is the covenants the Lord made with Abraham and later with David. Those covenants are unconditional. God appears to Abraham and tells him that he will be the father of a multitude of nations and God will be the God of Abraham. The Lord's covenant with Abraham is a demonstration of God's love and grace.

-  God initiates the covenant.
-  There is nothing that Abraham can do to either strengthen or weaken the covenant.
-  The covenant is never ending.

The New Testament writers picked up on the covenant theme. They understood that the death of Jesus, the Christ, was the beginning of the covenant (Mark 14:24; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Like the Abrahamic Covenant, it was a demonstration of God's love and grace. The ancestors of faith lived in the reality of that covenant, and so Christians today are invited to do the same.