GENESIS: THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS · STUDY NOTES

Study 11: The covenant

For personal study or groups

Your name

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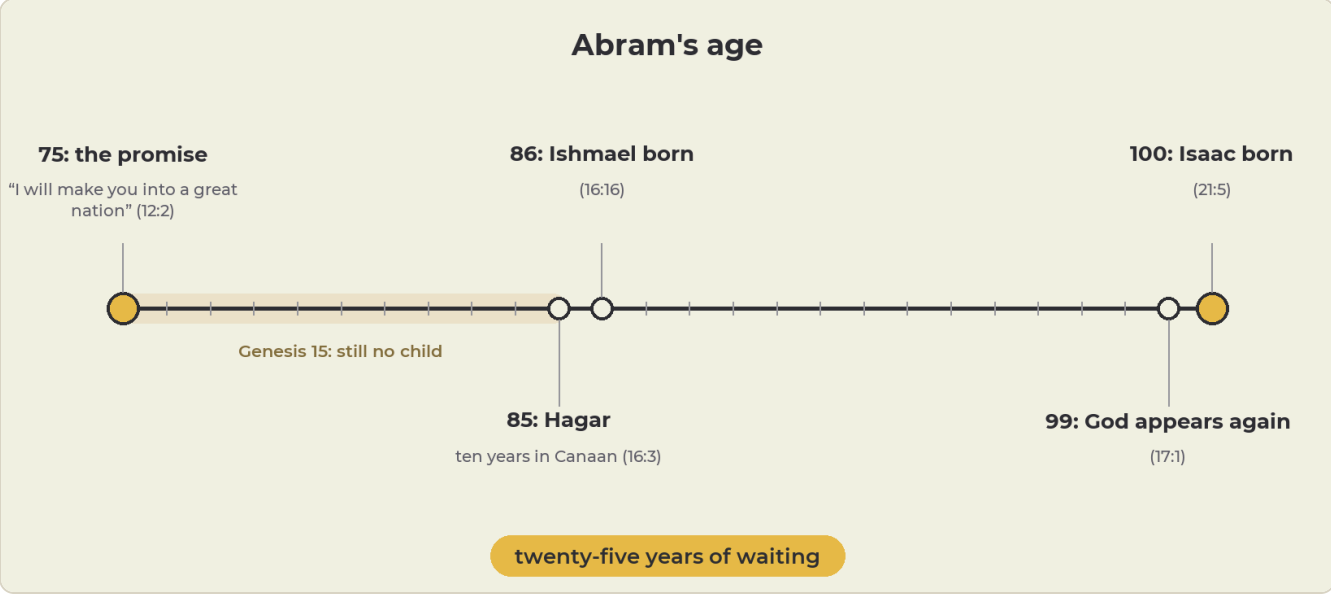
How to use these notes. Watch each part's video on biblehelp.net, or read the text below. Look up each passage in your own Bible and write the answer on the lines. The verses are printed at the back if you need them. At the end there are questions to think about on your own or to discuss in a group.

📖 **Before you start: read Genesis 15:1–16:16.** Read it in your own Bible, all the way through, before the videos. Then in this study we go through it together, a few verses at a time. (About 5 minutes.)

PART 1

He believed the LORD

Genesis 15:1–21; Romans 4:1–5, 18–25



Twenty-five years of waiting: Abram was 75 when God called him (12:4), 85 when Sarai gave him Hagar (16:3), 86 when Ishmael was born (16:16), 99 when God appeared to him again (17:1), and 100 when Isaac was born (21:5). Genesis 15 comes in the first ten years: still no child.

1. "Do not be afraid." After the battle with the kings, and after turning down the riches of Sodom, Abram heard the word of the LORD: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." God does not say "I will give you a shield", but "I am your shield"; not only gifts from God, but God Himself. "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God" (Isaiah 41:10).

1 **Read Genesis 15:1**

What did God say He was to Abram?

2. "What can You give me?" Abram was still childless, and in that world his chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus, could become his heir. His question is not unbelief, but an honest prayer from a man who believes and is struggling: "I do believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). God answered clearly: "one who comes from your own body will be your heir." Then He took Abram outside: "count the stars, if you are able... So shall your offspring be."

2 **Read Genesis 15:2–5**

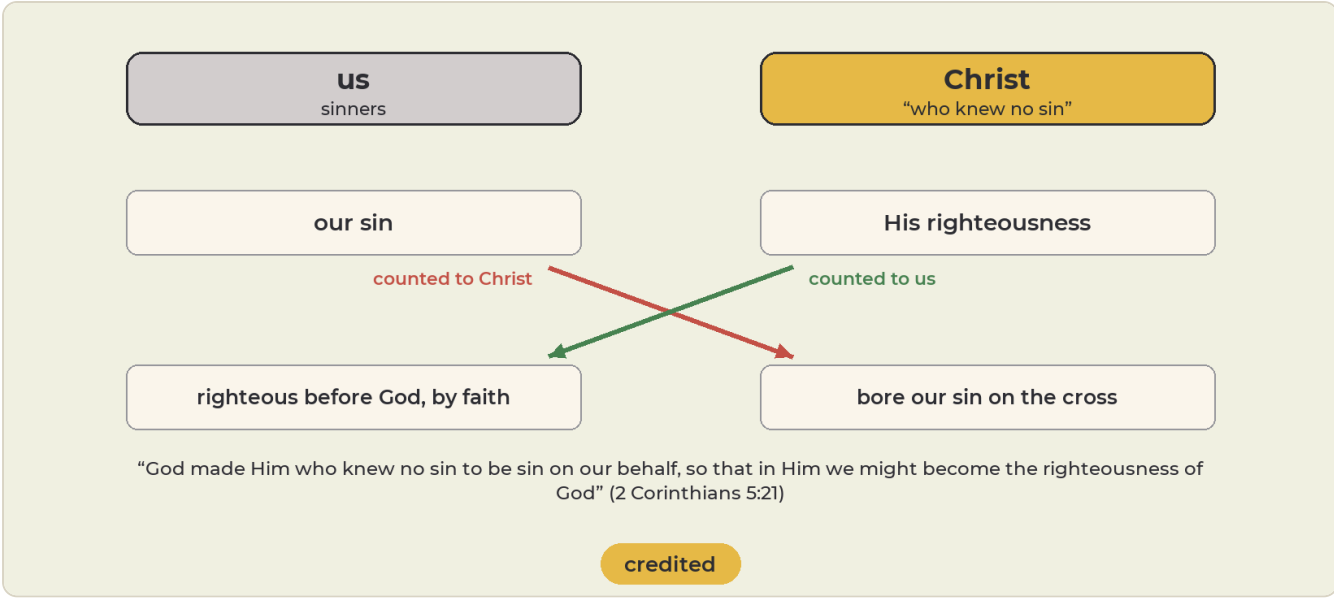
Who did Abram think would be his heir? What did God tell him to count?

3. "Abram believed the LORD." The first time the Bible speaks of believing. Nothing around Abram had changed: he was still old, Sarai was still barren, there was still no child. The only new thing was God's word, and Abram took God at His word. Faith is not a feeling or a leap in the dark; it is resting on what God has said, because of who God is.

4. "Credited to him as righteousness." Abram was not righteous in himself: he had grown up among idols, and he had lied in Egypt. But God "credited" righteousness to him, a word from accounting: God counted him as right with Himself. He received it by believing, not by working. Faith is like an empty hand that receives a gift. Spurgeon: faith "is counted to us for righteousness because she has Christ in her hand."

3 **Read Genesis 15:6**

What did Abram do? What was credited to him?



Credited: our sin was counted to Christ, and He bore it on the cross; His righteousness is counted to us, and by faith we are righteous before God. "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

4 **Read 2 Corinthians 5:21**

Who knew no sin? What do we become in Him?

5. Not by works. Paul goes straight back to Genesis 15:6. Wages are earned; a gift is received. Righteousness before God is never wages, but a gift "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly". God does not justify people who have first made themselves good; He justifies the ungodly. And Abram was counted righteous before he was circumcised (Romans 4:10–11): "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith… not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

5 **Read Romans 4:1–5**

Whom does God justify? What is credited as righteousness?

6. "Written… also for us." "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." He faced the facts, his own body and Sarah's, and still trusted God, "fully persuaded that God was able to do what He had promised". And his faith gave glory to God. "The words 'it was credited to him' were written

not only for Abraham, but also for us", who believe in God, "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead".

6 **Read Romans 4:18–25**

What was Abraham fully persuaded of? For whom were the words "it was credited to him" also written?

7. "How can I know?" "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans": the same words God would use at Sinai (Exodus 20:2). Abram asked for something to hold on to, and God told him to cut animals in two and lay the halves opposite each other. This was how a covenant was made: those who made it walked between the pieces, as if to say, "May I be torn in two like these, if I break my word" (Jeremiah 34:18). The birds of prey that came down are not explained, so we do not guess.

7 **Read Genesis 15:7–11**

What did God tell Abram to bring? What did Abram do with the animals?

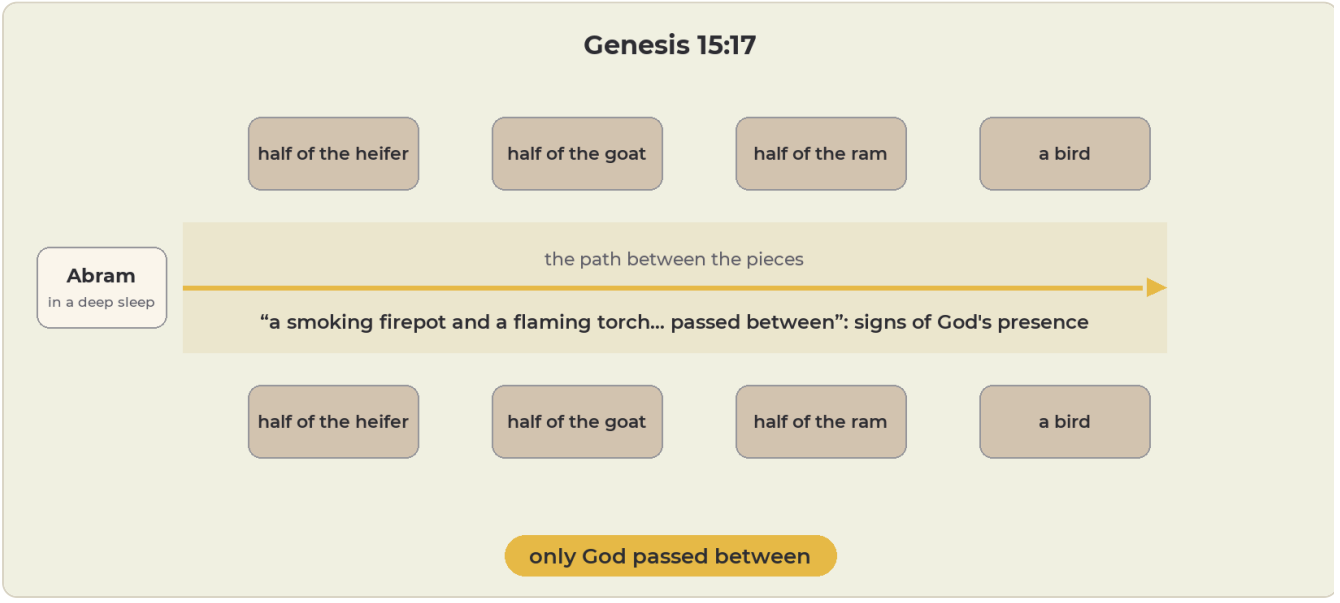
8. Hard news before good news. In a deep sleep and great darkness, Abram heard that his descendants would be strangers and slaves "four hundred years", then judged their oppressors and come out "with many possessions": the exodus, foretold. God would wait, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete": He is patient, even with the wicked, but His patience has an end. Abram himself would die in peace, still believing (Hebrews 11:13).

8 **Read Genesis 15:12–16**

What would happen to Abram's descendants? Why would they not return to the land at once?

9. Only God passed between. "A smoking firepot and a flaming torch appeared and passed between the halves": signs of God's presence. Abram was asleep, and did not walk the path.

God took the whole weight of the promise on Himself: "since He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself" (Hebrews 6:13).



Who passed between the pieces? The halves of the heifer, the goat and the ram, and the birds, on either side of the path; "a smoking firepot and a flaming torch… passed between": signs of God's presence. Abram, in a deep sleep, beside the path. Only God passed between.

9 **Read Genesis 15:17–21**

What passed between the pieces? What did the LORD give Abram's descendants?

10. The God who keeps covenant. Many teachers have seen more in this scene, and we offer it gently, because the Bible does not say it in so many words: the one who broke a covenant like this deserved to be torn apart, yet at the cross the Son of God bore the curse for covenant-breakers. We have even more reason than Abram to trust God's promises: we have the cross.

10 **Read Hebrews 6:13–18**

By whom did God swear when He made His promise to Abraham? Why did He do it?

PART 2

The God who sees

Genesis 16:1–16; Galatians 4:22–23, 28

1. Sarai's plan. Ten years in Canaan, and still no child. Sarai gave Abram her Egyptian maidservant Hagar, a custom of the day. But it was not God's way: God's way, from the beginning, was one man and one woman, and the promise was God's to keep, in His time. "And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai", as God said to Adam, "you have listened to the voice of your wife" (3:17); and as Eve took and gave, Sarai "took" Hagar and "gave" her to Abram.

11 **Read Genesis 16:1–3**

What did Sarai say to Abram? What did Abram do?

2. When we take matters into our own hands. The plan worked, and then everything went wrong. Hagar despised her mistress; Sarai blamed Abram; Abram stepped back: "Do whatever you want with her"; Sarai treated Hagar harshly, and Hagar ran away. Three people, and all of them sinned. Kevin DeYoung: "Stick to the problems God has given you. Don't go out and make new ones on your own."

12 **Read Genesis 16:4–6**

How did Hagar treat Sarai? What did Sarai do, and what did Hagar do?



Hagar's flight (places approximate): from Hebron, south through the Negev on the road to Shur, towards Egypt; a spring in the desert, between Kadesh and Bered.

3. The angel of the LORD found her. This is the first time the Bible speaks of "the angel of the LORD". He speaks as God ("I will greatly multiply your offspring"), and Hagar names "the LORD who had spoken to her" (16:13). Many teachers, Gill and Spurgeon among them, have seen here the Son of God, before He was born at Bethlehem. He found her by a spring, and called her by name, "Hagar, servant of Sarai", though Abram and Sarai never once did. "Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

13 **Read Genesis 16:7–12**

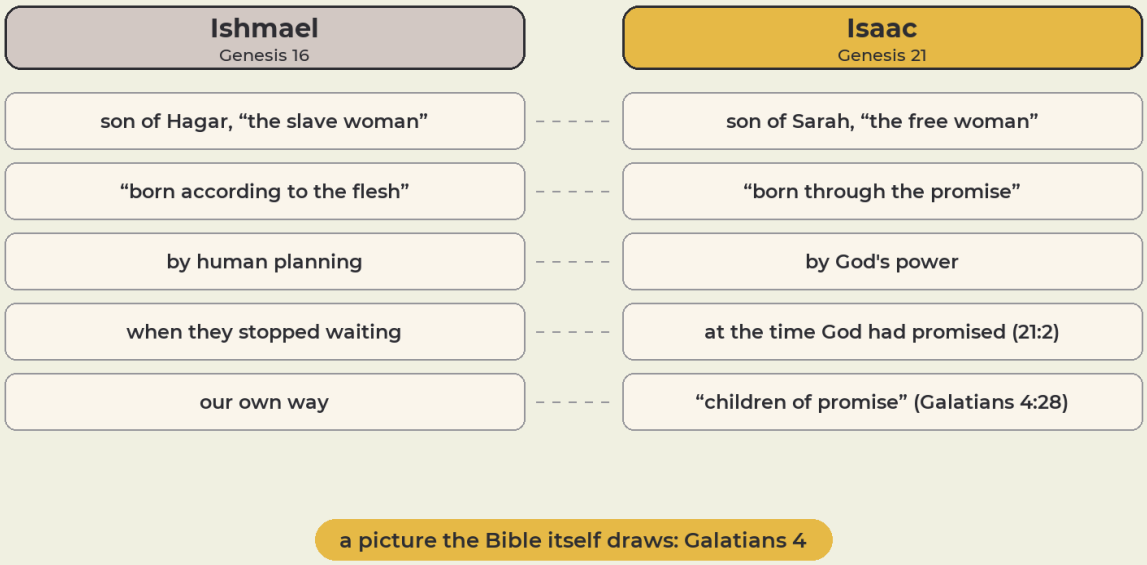
Where did the angel of the LORD find Hagar? What did he tell her to do? What was she to name her son, and why?

4. Grace for a runaway. "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority": hard, but for her good; alone in the desert she might well have died. And He sent her back with promises. Ishmael means "God hears": "for the LORD has heard your cry of affliction". The Bible does not say she had prayed; God heard her misery. This was grace to an Egyptian slave woman who had run away.

5. "You are the God who sees me." A runaway servant, a foreigner, gave the LORD this name. When no one else saw her, He saw her. The well was called Beer-lahai-roi, "the well of the Living One who sees me". And she went back, and bore Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael: God hears. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted; He saves the contrite in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

14 **Read Genesis 16:13–16**

What name did Hagar give the LORD? How old was Abram when Ishmael was born?



Two sons, a picture the Bible itself draws (Galatians 4): Ishmael, son of Hagar, the slave woman, "born according to the flesh", by human planning; Isaac, son of Sarah, the free woman, "born through the promise", by God's power, at God's time.

6. Children of promise. Paul uses this story to show that we are not right with God by faith plus our own efforts. Ishmael was "born according to the flesh", by Sarai's plan; Isaac was "born through the promise", by God's power alone. "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" (Galatians 4:28).

15 **Read Galatians 4:22–23**

How was the son of the slave woman born? How was the son of the free woman born?

7. God's way, not ours. In our salvation: "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Do I believe that God is able to save me without my help? And in daily life, the shortcut brings its own sorrows. God's timing is never late: "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son" (Galatians 4:4). "Wait patiently for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14).

Study 11 in summary

Still with no child, Abram took God at His word, and "it was credited to him as righteousness". Paul teaches from this that every sinner is made right with God in the same way: not by works, but by faith in Him who justifies the ungodly, because Christ bore our sin and His righteousness is counted to us. God bound Himself by covenant, passing alone between the pieces, so that His promise could not fail. Then Abram and Sarai stopped waiting, and tried to make the promise happen their own way, and it brought pride, blame, harshness and hurt. But the LORD went after Hagar in the desert, called her by name, heard her affliction, and was named by her "the God who sees me". Like Isaac, all who trust Christ are children of promise: saved by God's grace, in God's time.

THINK IT THROUGH

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What did Abram believe in Genesis 15:6, though nothing around him had changed?

2. According to Romans 4:5, whom does God justify, and how?

3. Why was Sarai's plan in Genesis 16 not God's way?

4. What did Hagar learn about God in the desert (Genesis 16:13)?

HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

Memory verse for study 11

Learn this verse by heart this week. Cut out the card and keep it where you will see it.

GENESIS · STUDY 11 · MEMORY VERSE

“Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Genesis 15:6

Berean Standard Bible · biblehelp.net

“I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.” (Psalm 119:11, BSB)

AT THE BACK

The Bible passages (BSB)

1 **Genesis 15:1** *After these events, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."*

2 **Genesis 15:2–5** *[2]But Abram replied, "O Lord GOD, what can You give me, since I remain childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" [3]Abram continued, "Behold, You have given me no offspring, so a servant in my household will be my heir." [4]Then the word of the LORD came to Abram, saying, "This one will not be your heir, but one who comes from your own body will be your heir." [5]And the LORD took him outside and said, "Now look to the heavens and count the stars, if you are able." Then He told him, "So shall your offspring be."*

3 **Genesis 15:6** *Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*

4 **2 Corinthians 5:21** *God made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*

5 **Romans 4:1–5** *[1]What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has discovered? [2]If Abraham was indeed justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God. [3]For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." [4]Now the wages of the worker are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation. [5]However, to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

6 **Romans 4:18–25** *[18]Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." [19]Without weakening in his faith, he acknowledged the decrepitness of his body (since he was about a hundred years old) and the lifelessness of Sarah's womb. [20]Yet he did not waver through disbelief in the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, [21]being fully persuaded that God was able to do what He had promised. [22]This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." [23]Now the words "it was credited to him" were written not only for Abraham, [24]but also for us, to whom righteousness will be credited—for us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. [25]He was delivered over to death for our trespasses and was raised to life for our justification.*

7 **Genesis 15:7–11** *[7]The LORD also told him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." [8]But Abram replied, "Lord GOD, how can I know that I will possess it?" [9]And the LORD said to him, "Bring Me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, along with a turtledove and a young pigeon." [10]So Abram brought all these to Him, split each of them down the middle, and laid the halves opposite each other. The birds, however, he did not cut in half. [11]And the birds of prey descended on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.*

8 **Genesis 15:12–16** *12As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and suddenly great terror and darkness overwhelmed him. 13Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 14But I will judge the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will depart with many possessions. 15You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a ripe old age. 16In the fourth generation your descendants will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."*

9 **Genesis 15:17–21** *17When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, behold, a smoking firepot and a flaming torch appeared and passed between the halves of the carcasses. 18On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land—from the river of Egypt to the great River Euphrates— 19the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."*

10 **Hebrews 6:13–18** *13When God made His promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself, 14saying, "I will surely bless you and multiply your descendants." 15And so Abraham, after waiting patiently, obtained the promise. 16Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and their oath serves as a confirmation to end all argument. 17So when God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of the promise, He guaranteed it with an oath. 18Thus by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be strongly encouraged.*

11 **Genesis 16:1–3** *1Now Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. 2So Sarai said to Abram, "Look now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go to my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3So after he had lived in Canaan for ten years, his wife Sarai took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to Abram to be his wife.*

12 **Genesis 16:4–6** *4And he slept with Hagar, and she conceived. But when Hagar realized that she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be upon you! I delivered my servant into your arms, and ever since she saw that she was pregnant, she has treated me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me." 6"Here," said Abram, "your servant is in your hands. Do whatever you want with her." Then Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that she fled from her.*

13 **Genesis 16:7–12** *7Now the angel of the LORD found Hagar by a spring of water in the desert—the spring along the road to Shur. 8"Hagar, servant of Sarai," he said, "where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I am running away from my mistress Sarai," she replied. 9So the angel of the LORD told her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority." 10Then the angel added, "I will greatly multiply your offspring so that they will be too numerous to count." 11The angel of the LORD proceeded: "Behold, you have conceived and will bear a son. And you shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard your cry of affliction. 12He will be a wild donkey of a man, and his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."*

14 **Genesis 16:13–16** *13So Hagar gave this name to the LORD who had spoken to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “Here I have seen the One who sees me!” 14Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi. It is located between Kadesh and Bered. 15And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.*

15 **Galatians 4:22–23** *22For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born through the promise.*

Scripture: Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain. Quotations keep its American spelling. Like many English Bibles, it often says ‘man’, ‘he’ or ‘brothers’ where it means people in general, men and women alike.

FOR GROUP LEADERS

Study 11: The covenant

> **Memory verse:** “Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6). Say it together at the end, and ask who can say it without looking.

Aims

- See from Genesis 15 Abram, still with no child, take God at His word, and hear the great sentence: "Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (15:6).
- Learn from Romans 4 that this is how every sinner is made right with God: not by works, but by faith in "Him who justifies the ungodly", because Christ bore our sin and His righteousness is counted to us (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- See God bind Himself by covenant, passing alone between the pieces, so that His promise cannot fail (Hebrews 6:13–18).
- See from Genesis 16 the trouble that came when Abram and Sarai stopped waiting and tried to make the promise happen their own way; and the God who went after Hagar in the desert, heard her affliction, and was named by her "the God who sees me".

Suggested timing (about 75 minutes, or two meetings)

- **5 min** Welcome and short prayer. Ask the group to read Genesis 15 and 16 before the meeting.
- **35 min** Part 1 video (20 min); Genesis 15:1–21, with Romans 4:1–5 and 4:18–25.
- **25 min** Part 2 video (14 min); Genesis 16:1–16, with Galatians 4:22–23 and 4:28.
- **10 min** Reflection questions. Close in prayer, thanking God that He counts sinners righteous through faith in Christ, and that He sees and hears His people.

For most groups, take one part each week. If you do, read the passage for that part aloud together before the video.

Tips

- **"Credited"** (Part 1) is the heart of the study. Use the picture: our sin counted to Christ, His righteousness counted to us. Some members may think faith itself is a good work that earns God's favour; the study answers that faith is "an empty hand" that receives a gift. Let Romans 4:5, "Him who justifies the ungodly", do the work.
- **Doubts:** Abram's question, "What can You give me?", is shown as an honest prayer, not unbelief. Members who struggle to believe may find this a comfort (Mark 9:24).
- **The covenant ceremony** may seem strange. Explain the custom simply (Jeremiah 34:18), and keep the focus on the point: only God passed between the pieces. The birds of prey (15:11) are left unexplained in the study, because the Bible does not explain them; if they come up, say so.
- **The cross** in Part 1 (Christ bearing the curse of the broken covenant) is offered gently, as something "many teachers have seen". Present it in the same way.
- **Sarai's plan** (Part 2): the study keeps to the Bible's words. Some members may know the pain of childlessness; be gentle, and do not make Sarai's longing the sin, only the way she chose. The study calls the plan wrong because God's way is one man and one woman.
- **Hagar:** the study says that all three sinned, and also that Hagar was a servant with little power over her own life who was treated badly. Members who have been treated harshly may find "the God who sees me" a great comfort. Do not press anyone to share.

- **The angel of the LORD:** the study shows from the text that he speaks as God, and says that many teachers have seen here the Son of God before Bethlehem. It does not argue against other views; do the same.
- **"Return to your mistress"** (16:9) should not be used to tell anyone to go back to someone who harms them. The study says plainly that the way Hagar had been treated was not right; God sent her back to safety, food and her child's father, and above all with His promises.
- **Galatians 4:** the video reads only verses 22–23 and 28. If your group wants to read the whole passage (4:21–31), keep to Paul's main point: we are children of promise by God's grace, not by our own efforts.