GENESIS: THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS · STUDY NOTES

Study 12: The sign, and the three visitors

For personal study or groups

Your name

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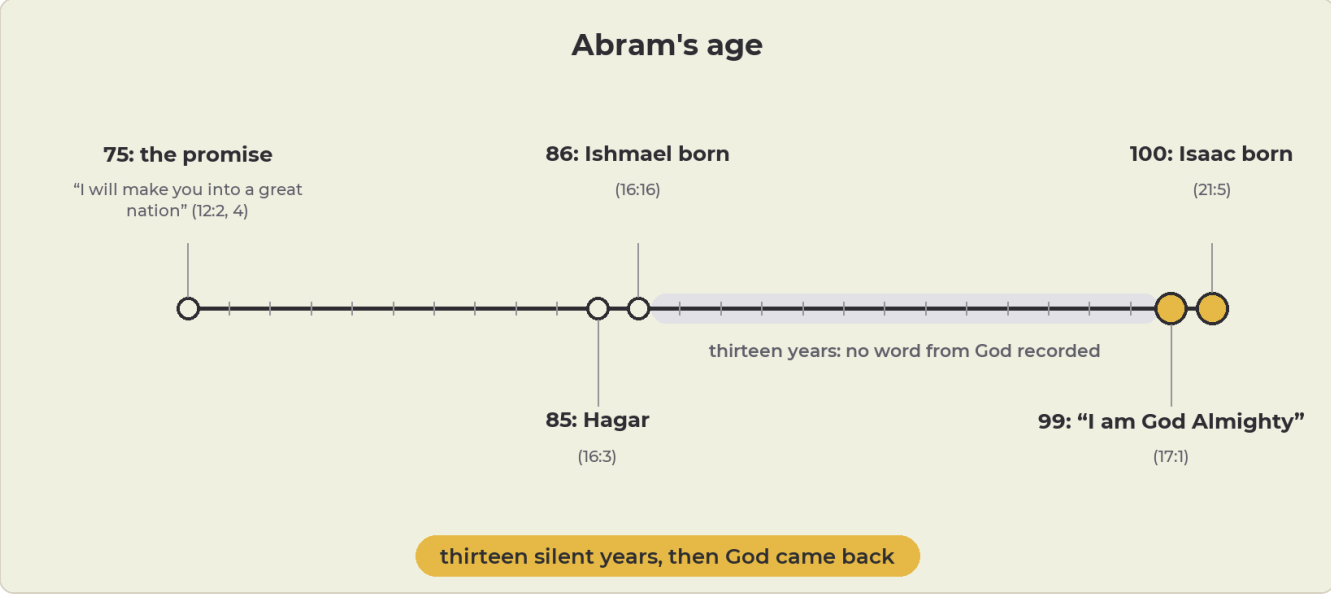
How to use these notes. Watch each part's video on biblehelp.net, or read the text below. Look up each passage in your own Bible and write the answer on the lines. The verses are printed at the back if you need them. At the end there are questions to think about on your own or to discuss in a group.

📖 **Before you start: read Genesis 17:1–18:15.** 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

Abraham, and the sign of the covenant

Genesis 17:1–27; Romans 4:9–12



Thirteen silent years: Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born (16:16), and 99 when the LORD appeared to him again (17:1). For thirteen years the Bible records no word from God. Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 (21:5).

1. "I am God Almighty." After thirteen silent years, God came back to Abram, not to reject him for the Hagar plan, but to begin again with him. "I am God Almighty": strong enough to do whatever He has said, and enough for His people in every need. Abram had taken a shortcut because he could not see how God would keep His word; God did not need his plan. "Walk before Me" means living in His presence, at work and at home as well as in prayer; "be blameless" means wholehearted and sincere, not sinless (Noah and Job were called blameless).

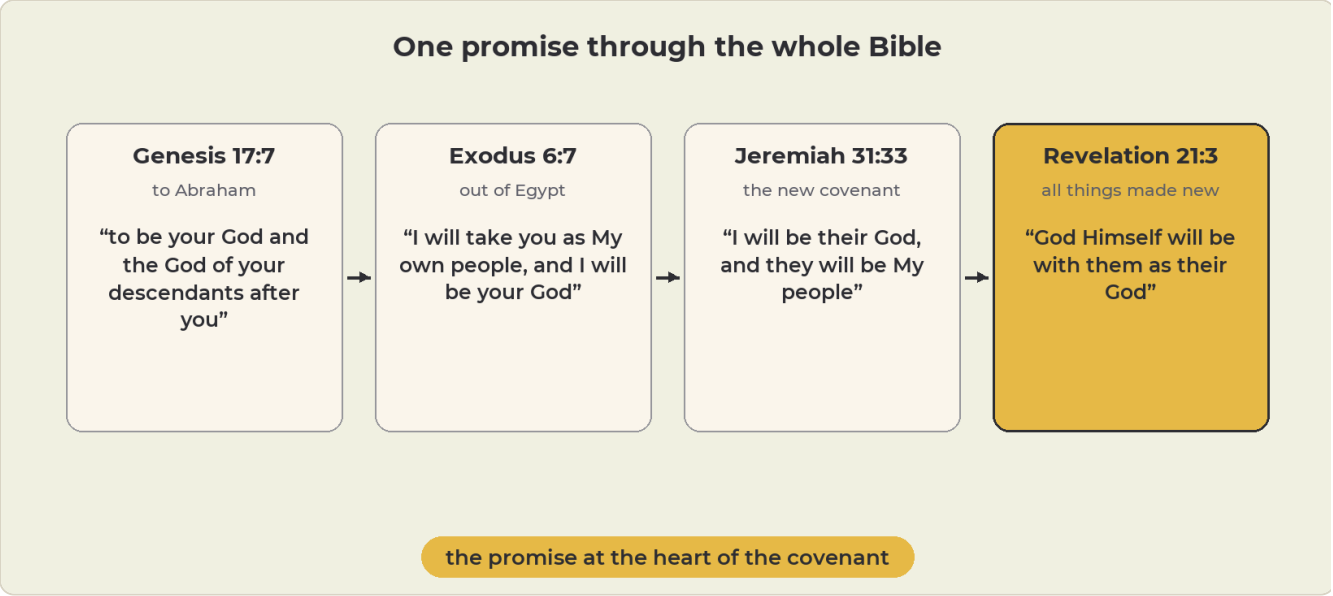
1 **Read Genesis 17:1–2**

How old was Abram? What did God call Himself, and what did He tell Abram to do?

2. "As for Me." God speaks first about what He will do: "I will... I will... I will". He changes Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many nations"), giving the name before the children came: God "calls into being what does not yet exist" (Romans 4:17). Kings would come from him, and in the end the King of kings. And the heart of it all: "to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."

2 **Read Genesis 17:3–8**

What new name did God give Abram, and why? What did God promise to be?



One promise through the whole Bible: "to be your God" (Genesis 17:7); "I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7); "I will be their God, and they will be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33); "God Himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).

3. "As for you." God's grace comes first, but those who belong to Him are called to keep His covenant. The sign was circumcision: a mark in the body, for life, given to baby boys at eight days old, and also to servants from other nations. A man who refused it would be "cut off from his people", because he was refusing the God of the covenant.

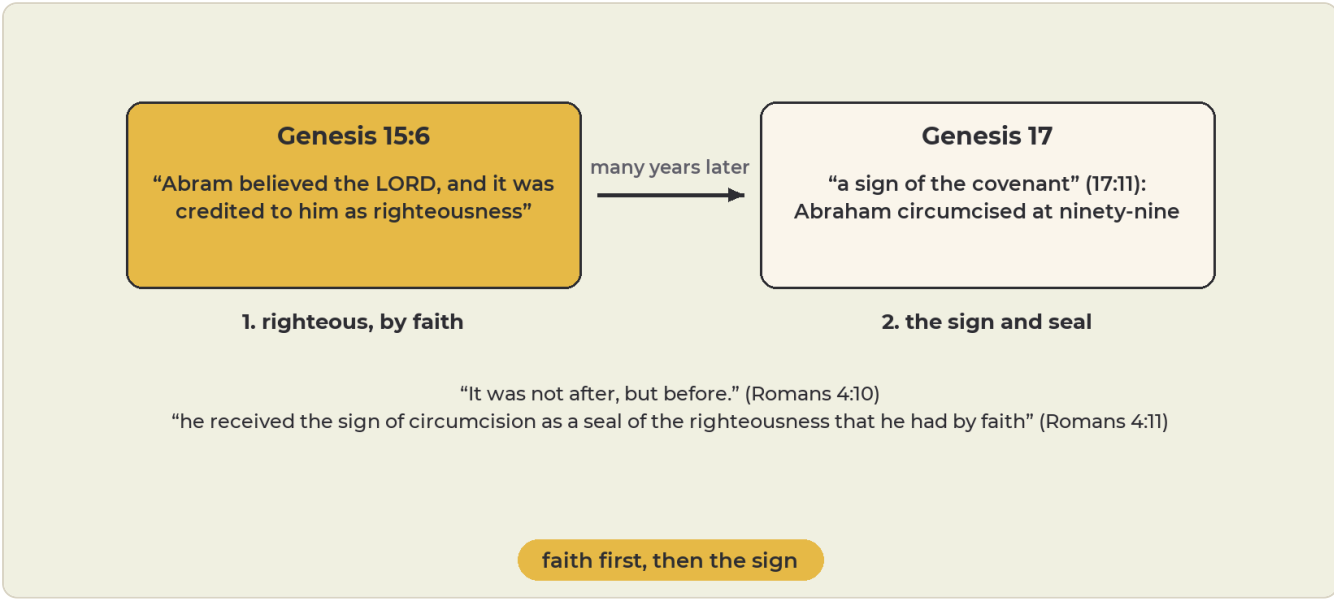
3 **Read Genesis 17:9–14**

What was the sign of the covenant? Who was to receive it?

4. Faith first, then the sign. Abraham was counted righteous in chapter 15, when he believed; he was circumcised in chapter 17, many years later. "It was not after, but before." Circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith", so Abraham is "the father of all who believe". We are not saved by our obedience; we obey because we have been saved.

4 **Read Romans 4:9–12**

Was Abraham counted righteous before or after he was circumcised? Whose father is he?



Faith first, then the sign: "Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6); many years later, "a sign of the covenant" (Genesis 17:11). "It was not after, but before" (Romans 4:10).

5. A circumcised heart. The sign pointed to something deeper. "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts... and you will love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). "Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit" (Romans 2:29); it is "the circumcision performed by Christ and not by human hands" (Colossians 2:11). The question for each of us is: has God changed my heart?

5 **Read Romans 2:28–29**

Where is true circumcision? Whose praise does such a person receive?

6. "As for Sarai." For the first time God says plainly that the son will be Sarah's. Abraham fell facedown and laughed: some hear joy and wonder in it, others a struggle to believe; either way, the promise seemed impossible, and that was the point. He prayed for Ishmael, and God heard him: Ishmael would have twelve princes (25:16). But the covenant would continue through Isaac, whose name means "he laughs", born "at this time next year".

6 **Read Genesis 17:15–22**

What new name did Sarai receive? What did Abraham ask for Ishmael, and what did God answer?

7. "On that very day." Abraham obeyed at once, exactly as God had said, and at great cost: at ninety-nine, in pain, a stranger among the Canaanites. Faith that has been met by God shows itself in obedience.

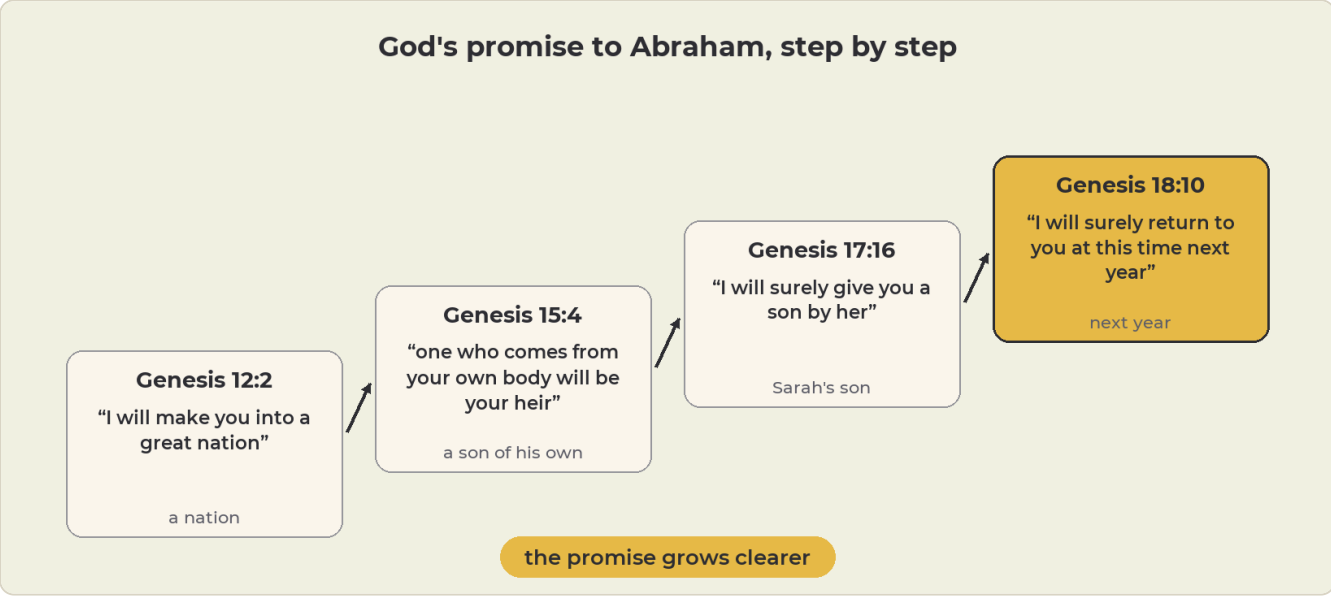
7 **Read Genesis 17:23–27**

When did Abraham obey? Who was circumcised with him?

PART 2

Is anything too difficult for the LORD?

Genesis 18:1–15; Luke 1:34–37



The promise grows clearer: "I will make you into a great nation" (12:2); "one who comes from your own body will be your heir" (15:4); "I will surely give you a son by her" (17:16); "I will surely return to you at this time next year" (18:10).

1. Three visitors at the tent. "The LORD appeared to Abraham." Abraham saw three men in the heat of the day, ran to meet them, and gave them a feast, standing by to serve them while they ate. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). True faith makes a person generous and humble; in the next chapter Sodom shows the very opposite.

8 **Read Genesis 18:1–8**

What did Abraham do when he saw the three men? What did he give them?

2. Who were the three? One of them is called "the LORD" (18:10, 13, 22); two are called angels (19:1). Many teachers, John Gill among them, have seen in the one the Son of God, appearing before He was born at Bethlehem. The LORD came to Abraham's tent as his guest; in Christ, "the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

3. Sarah laughed. The visitors knew her name, and her new name. Sarah had passed the age of childbearing, and "she laughed to herself". But the LORD heard the laugh no one else heard; nothing in our hearts is hidden from Him. Afraid, she denied it: "No," replied the LORD, "but you

did laugh." "Laugh" and "Isaac" come from the same Hebrew word. Peter later remembers Sarah for calling Abraham "lord" (1 Peter 3:6).

9 **Read Genesis 18:9–15**

Why did Sarah laugh? What did the LORD ask? What did Sarah say when she was afraid?

4. "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" The question outweighs every reason for doubt. Jeremiah prayed: "Nothing is too difficult for You!" (Jeremiah 32:17). It was asked about a promise God had made, so what God has promised, He will certainly do: "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). What He has not promised, we bring to Him in prayer, trusting Him, "in the hope that God may grant them repentance" (2 Timothy 2:25).

10 **Read Jeremiah 32:17**

What did God make by His great power? What is too difficult for Him?

5. A greater birth. Like Sarah, Mary heard a promise that seemed impossible: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel pointed her to Elizabeth, old and barren like Sarah, and said: "For no word from God will ever fail." Isaac's birth was one step on the road to Bethlehem.

11 **Read Luke 1:34–37**

What did Mary ask? What had happened to Elizabeth? What did the angel say about God's word?

6. Kept to the day. "The LORD did for Sarah what He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son... at the very time God had promised" (21:1–2). And the woman who laughed is remembered for her faith: "she considered Him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11).

12 **Read Hebrews 11:11**

What enabled Sarah to conceive? How did she think of God?

Study 12 in summary

After thirteen silent years, God came back to Abram: "I am God Almighty." He made His covenant plain: His part ("As for Me"), Abraham's part ("As for you") and Sarah's place in it, with new names and, at the heart of it all, the promise "to be your God". Circumcision was the sign, given years after Abraham was counted righteous by faith (Romans 4), and it pointed to a circumcised heart, the work of Christ by the Spirit. Then the LORD came to Abraham's tent, and Sarah laughed at the promise of a son. "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" A year later Isaac was born, at the very time God had promised, and Sarah is remembered for her faith. What God has promised, He will do.

THINK IT THROUGH

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What did God mean when He called Himself "God Almighty" (Genesis 17:1)?

2. According to Romans 4:10–11, why does it matter that Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised?

3. What did circumcision point to (Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:29)?

4. What has God promised you, and why can you trust Him (Genesis 18:14)?

HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

Memory verse for study 12

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

GENESIS · STUDY 12 · MEMORY VERSE

“Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you—in about a year—and Sarah will have a son.”

Genesis 18:14

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 17:1–2** *1When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and be blameless. 2I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly."*

2 **Genesis 17:3–8** *3Then Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, 4"As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5No longer will you be called Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will descend from you. 7I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8And to you and your descendants I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as an eternal possession; and I will be their God."*

3 **Genesis 17:9–14** *9God also said to Abraham, "You must keep My covenant—you and your descendants in the generations after you. 10This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you, which you are to keep: Every male among you must be circumcised. 11You are to circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and this will be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12Generation after generation, every male must be circumcised when he is eight days old, including those born in your household and those purchased from a foreigner—even those who are not your offspring. 13Whether they are born in your household or purchased, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh will be an everlasting covenant. 14But if any male is not circumcised, he will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."*

4 **Romans 4:9–12** *9Is this blessing only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. 10In what context was it credited? Was it after his circumcision, or before? It was not after, but before. 11And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but are not circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.*

5 **Romans 2:28–29** *28A man is not a Jew because he is one outwardly, nor is circumcision only outward and physical. 29No, a man is a Jew because he is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise does not come from men, but from God.*

6 **Genesis 17:15–22** *15Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, do not call her Sarai, for her name is to be Sarah. 16And I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will descend from her.” 17Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah give birth at the age of ninety?” 18And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live under Your blessing!” 19But God replied, “Your wife Sarah will indeed bear you a son, and you are to name him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 20As for Ishmael, I have heard you, and I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He will become the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. 21But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.” 22When He had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.*

7 **Genesis 17:23–27** *23On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or purchased with his money—every male among the members of Abraham’s household—and he circumcised them, just as God had told him. 24So Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, 25and his son Ishmael was thirteen; 26Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on the same day. 27And all the men of Abraham’s household—both servants born in his household and those purchased from foreigners—were circumcised with him.*

8 **Genesis 18:1–8** *1Then the LORD appeared to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre in the heat of the day, while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent. 2And Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. 3“My lord,” said Abraham, “if I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. 4Let a little water be brought, that you may wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. 5And I will bring a bit of bread so that you may refresh yourselves. This is why you have passed your servant’s way. After that, you may continue on your way.” “Yes,” they replied, “you may do as you have said.” 6So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, “Quick! Prepare three seahs of fine flour, knead it, and bake some bread.” 7Meanwhile, Abraham ran to the herd, selected a tender and choice calf, and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. 8Then Abraham brought curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and he set them before the men and stood by them under the tree as they ate.*

9 **Genesis 18:9–15** *9“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked. “There, in the tent,” he replied. 10Then the LORD said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son!” Now Sarah was behind him, listening at the entrance to the tent. 11And Abraham and Sarah were already old and well along in years; Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. 12So she laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” 13And the LORD asked Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Can I really bear a child when I am old?’ 14Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you—in about a year—and Sarah will have a son.” 15But Sarah was afraid, so she denied it and said, “I did not laugh.” “No,” replied the LORD, “but you did laugh.”*

10 **Jeremiah 32:17** *“Oh, Lord GOD! You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for You!*

11 **Luke 1:34–37** *34“How can this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” 35The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. 36Look, even Elizabeth your relative has conceived a son in her old age, and she who was called barren is in her sixth month. 37For no word from God will ever fail.”*

12 **Hebrews 11:11** *By faith Sarah, even though she was barren and beyond the proper age, was enabled to conceive a child, because she considered Him faithful who had promised.*

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 12: The sign, and the three visitors

> **Memory verse:** “Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you—in about a year—and Sarah will have a son.” (Genesis 18:14). Say it together at the end, and ask who can say it without looking.

Aims

- See God come back to Abram after thirteen silent years, not to reject him for the Hagar plan, but to say "I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless" (17:1).
- See the covenant made plain: God's promises ("As for Me"), with the new names and the heart of it all, "to be your God"; and Abraham's part ("As for you"), with circumcision as its sign.
- Learn from Romans 4:9–12 that Abraham was counted righteous by faith before he received the sign, and that circumcision pointed to a circumcised heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:28–29; Colossians 2:11).
- See the LORD come to Abraham's tent, hear Sarah laugh at the promise, and answer the question "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (18:14), with what God has promised us in Christ.

Suggested timing (about 75 minutes, or two meetings)

- **5 min** Welcome and short prayer. Ask the group to read Genesis 17 and 18:1–15 before the meeting.
- **35 min** Part 1 video (18 min); Genesis 17:1–27, with Romans 4:9–12 and Romans 2:28–29.
- **25 min** Part 2 video (13 min); Genesis 18:1–15, with Luke 1:34–37.
- **10 min** Reflection questions. Close in prayer, thanking God that nothing He has promised is too difficult for Him.

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

Tips

- **Circumcision** is described in the study in one plain sentence. Keep it short and discreet, especially with young people present. The point is what it meant: the sign of the covenant, pointing to a changed heart.
- **Baptism** is not discussed in this study. If the question comes up, keep the group on what the passage teaches: justification by faith first (Romans 4:10–11), and the circumcised heart (Deuteronomy 30:6).
- **"Be blameless"** does not mean sinless (Noah and Job were called blameless). Members who feel they can never be "perfect" may be helped by this.
- **Abraham's laugh** (17:17): the study gives both readings, joy and wonder, or a struggle to believe, without deciding. Let the group see that either way the promise was humanly impossible.
- **The three visitors** (18:2): the study says that one is called "the LORD" and two are angels (19:1), and that many teachers see the Son of God in the one. Do not go further than the text; and keep any picture of God out of the discussion.
- **"Is anything too difficult for the LORD?"** is not a promise that every hard thing will be taken away. The study distinguishes what God has promised (and will surely do) from what we ask Him for in prayer. Members who are praying for something hard, such as a child, healing, or a loved one far from God, may need this gently.
- **Sarah** is treated gently: her laugh and her lie are named, but she is remembered for her faith (Hebrews 11:11).