

October 1
Lesson 5 (NIV)

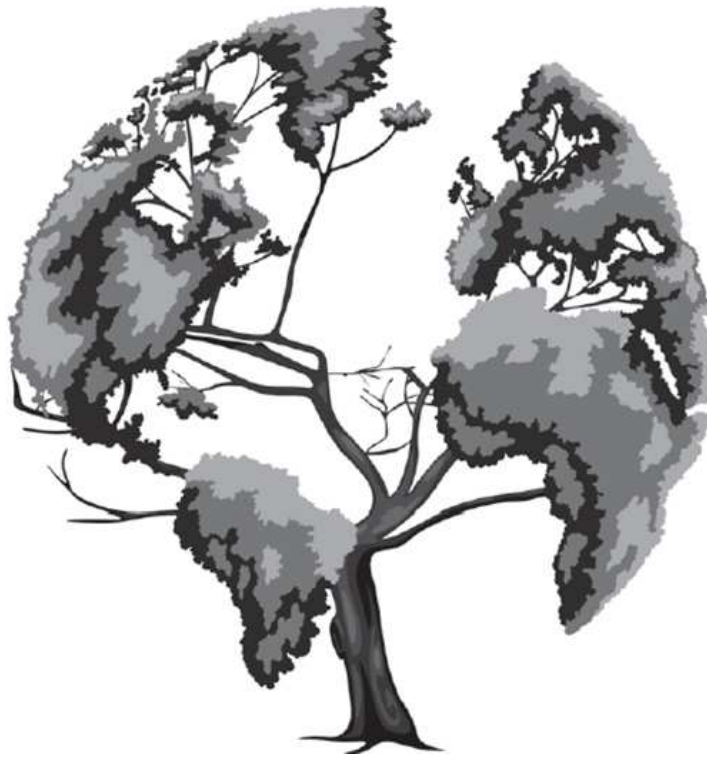
GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 33:1-9

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 15

GENESIS 15:1-6, 17-21

¹
After
this,
the
word
of
the
LORD
came
to



Graphic: Chatchai Nuchlamyong / iStock / Thinkstock

Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

² But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵ He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

KEY VERSE

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.”—Genesis 15:18

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List key elements of Abraham’s vision.
2. Explain the relationship between belief and righteousness.
3. Write a prayer of commitment to produce spiritual offspring for Christ.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Such a Deal
- B. Lesson Background

I. Apprehension (GENESIS 15:1-3)

- A. God’s Protection (v. 1)
Regarding Risk and Reward

- B. Abraham’s Protest (vv. 2, 3)

II. Assurance (GENESIS 15:4-6)

- A. God Blesses (vv. 4, 5)
- B. Abraham Believes (v. 6)
Taking the Plunge

III. Affirmation (GENESIS 15:17-21)

- A. Concluding a Ceremony (v. 17)
- B. Confirming a Covenant (vv. 18-21)

Conclusion

- A. Join the Club
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Such a Deal

In 1984, the Kansas City Royals wanted to keep star third baseman George Brett on the team. To do so, they negotiated a rather odd contract. First, the Royals agreed to give Brett the bat he used in the infamous 1983 “pine tar game,” when his go-ahead home run was ruled an out (a decision later reversed) because he allegedly had too much pine tar on his bat. Second, the contract also gave Brett part ownership of an apartment complex in Memphis!

While we may never sign an agreement giving us a baseball bat and buildings, we are familiar with contracts. Whether we call an agreement a contract, a pledge, or a covenant, the sealing of promises has always been an essential element of society. This lesson looks at a covenant, not between people, but between a person and God.

B. Lesson Background

God’s covenant with Abraham began when the Lord called him (at the time known as Abram) to leave his homeland and move to unfamiliar surroundings (Genesis 12:1). Abraham obeyed “even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The year was about 2000 BC.

Though Abraham’s initial obedience was exemplary, his faith journey was not without bumps. By the end of the same chapter in which Abraham left his homeland in response to God’s call, he had passed off his wife Sarah (known as Sarai at that stage) as his sister in order to gain favorable treatment from Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-13).

Abraham also had to deal with certain problems involving his nephew Lot, who had chosen to live in the vicinity of Sodom (Genesis 13:5-13). When Sodom became entangled in a regional war between coalitions of kings, Lot was captured (14:1-12). Abraham had to lead a commando raid to defeat a coalition and rescue Lot (14:13-16).

Following this victory, Abraham was met by Melchizedek, who was “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High” (14:18). He blessed Abraham, and in return Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils taken in battle (14:19, 20).

I. Apprehension

(GENESIS 15:1-3)

As Genesis 15 opens, the scene has shifted from Abraham’s interactions with earthly kings to an encounter with the ultimate king, God himself.

A. God’s Protection (v. 1)

1a. After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram.

Do not be afraid is one of the most common commands in Scripture. Usually the speaker is God or an angel, and Abraham is addressed by his original name before it is changed ([Genesis 17:5](#)). If he feared the Egyptians enough to lie about his relationship with his wife (see the Lesson Background), how much more likely is he to be terrified of God! The Bible uses the word *vision* more than a hundred times, and this is the first. God communicates in various ways before the coming of Christ ([Hebrews 1:1](#)), and visions are one method.

1b. “I am your shield,

The word picture of the Lord as a *shield* is not uncommon in the Old Testament (see [Deuteronomy 33:29](#); [Psalms 3:3](#); [28:7](#); [84:11](#); [115:9-11](#); etc.). Similar metaphors, such as rock, fortress, and stronghold, highlight the Lord to be a trustworthy, steadfast source of strength (compare [2 Samuel 22:3](#); [Psalms 18:2](#); [31:3](#); [71:3](#); etc.).

1c. “your very great reward.”

Of greater interest may be why the Lord describes himself as Abraham’s *very great reward*. After the successful night attack in [Genesis 14:15, 16](#), the king of Sodom, who had benefited from Abraham’s victory, offered him all the plunder seized from the enemy. But Abraham declined because he did not want the king to be able to claim he had “made Abram rich” ([14:23](#)). Following this refusal of a reward, the Lord now comes to Abraham and says, in effect, “Although you have turned down a reward, I can give you a far greater one; in fact, I am your greatest reward.”

REGARDING RISK AND REWARD

After teaching him how to use the special keyboard, I watched Musa (name changed) type the first words of Scripture ever written in his language. Musa’s easy smile belied the difficult and risky decision he had made.

He is one of very few Christians among his people. Years before, the secret police caught him talking about Jesus; they pulled out his toenails and threw him into a pit. He moved to a neighboring country with his family but returned to translate the Bible for his people. He had left comfortable living conditions for an uncomfortable and dangerous environment far from his family. Why would he take such a risk?

We could ask the same question of Abraham. Their two answers would be similar: they left home in obedience to God. We understand that we are not guaranteed safety in this world. But when we yield to God’s call, we reap the eternal rewards of his blessing—what a promise!

Are God’s call and promise compelling you to go to risky and uncomfortable places? If so, when will you get started?

—D. & L. G.

B. Abraham’s Protest (vv. 2, 3)

2a. But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless

Abraham’s response indicates that he is wrestling with how to reconcile God’s grand declaration with the current circumstances. His words reflect continuing awareness of the Lord’s promise to make of Abraham “a great nation” ([Genesis 12:2](#)). But that requires descendants (compare [12:7](#)). Yet at this point Abraham remains childless, and his wife is past the age of childbearing (compare [12:4](#) with [17:17](#)). How can God truly be Abraham’s “very great reward” under these circumstances?

What Do You Think?

Other than proper use of [Romans 8:28](#), what are some ways to encourage fellow believers to maintain hope in difficult circumstances?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In the face of personal tragedy or loss
- In the face of financial pressure
- In the face of family problems
- Other

2b. “and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”

Abraham reasons the likely outcome. His concern stems from a practice of the time, confirmed by archaeological finds at Nuzi in the 1920s. According to custom, a childless couple can adopt a household servant or steward, who cares for them and provides proper burial when they die. Then the servant inherits the family property. Abraham can see no outcome but this one.

Abraham’s servant Eliezer may have been acquired during travel from Haran to Canaan ([Genesis 12:4, 5](#)), since Damascus is located between the two. Assuming he is still living at the time, Eliezer is likely the “senior servant” in [24:2](#), who is dispatched to find a wife for Isaac.

3. And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

Abraham now states as a fact what he presented as a question in the previous verse. The custom, if not prevailing law, is quite clear.

What Do You Think?

How should Christians admit to uncertainties regarding God’s promises, if ever?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In congregational gatherings
- In midsize groups
- In small groups
- In one-on-one counseling
- In private times with God

II. Assurance

(GENESIS 15:4-6)

God later declares Abraham to be “a prophet” ([Genesis 20:7](#)). But perhaps Abraham isn’t quite there yet. Hearing and believing prophecies from God, who is the ultimate prophet, is a vital prerequisite.

A. God Blesses (vv. 4, 5)

4 Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”

God responds to Abraham’s statement in [Genesis 15:3](#) with the assurance we see here. Abraham is to father a child who will be the heir, but when that will occur is not stated. As comforting as *the word of the Lord* is at this time, it will not be fulfilled until Abraham is age 100 and his wife is 90 ([17:17](#)). As the years drag on, that unknown timing will be a continual challenge to Abraham’s faith, even as he considers that “his body was as good as dead” ([Romans 4:19](#)).

5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Now the Lord provides a visual aid to show Abraham the magnitude of what lies ahead. Being challenged to *count the stars* would seem to indicate that this communication from God occurs at night. But caution reminds us that [Genesis 15:1](#), above, speaks of a vision. Therefore we do not know if night has actually fallen by this time or if the command to look at the stars is part of what Abraham witnesses in his vision. It’s also possible that the vision of [15:1](#) and the word of the Lord of [15:4](#) occur at different times.

Later, in [Genesis 22:17](#), we find the added imagery of seashore sand that further illustrates how innumerable Abraham’s descendants will be. [Hebrews 11:12](#) also uses both comparisons.

What Do You Think?

What cues can you begin using to remind yourself daily of the certainty of God’s promises?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Cues involving the sense of sight
- Cues involving the sense of sound
- Cues involving the sense of touch
- Cues involving the sense of taste
- Cues involving the sense of smell

We know from the New Testament that God’s promise to Abraham refers not only to the great nation that comes from his natural descendants ([Genesis 46:2, 3; 47:27](#)) but also to the spiritual descendants who will respond to Jesus in faith, as Abraham did to God. [Galatians 3:26-29](#) establishes this link, especially [verse 29](#): “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Paul makes a similar connection in [Romans 4:16-18](#). Note that the conclusion of that segment is the same as the concluding line of the verse before us.

B. Abraham Believes (v. 6)

6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

This declaration is so important that the New Testament quotes or refers to it five times (see [Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6](#); and [James 2:23](#)). Faith is what God has always asked of people, whether in Old or New Testament times. We today are not called to respond to the same covenant Abraham was offered in this passage; but we are called to respond to God’s covenant at present, which requires us to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ ([John 3:16; 20:30, 31](#)).

The verb behind the translation *credited* occurs about 150 times in the Old Testament, and this is the first. The idea in contexts similar to this one is to regard something or someone as having a certain characteristic, although that thing or person may not actually have that characteristic (compare [Genesis 31:15; Numbers 18:27; Job 18:3; Proverbs 17:28](#); etc.). The translation in the New Testament passages [Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6](#); and [James 2:23](#) noted above is “credited” in every case. This captures the idea of the same Greek word used in all instances.

And what a marvelous concept it is! Because of our sin, “there is no one righteous, not even one” ([Romans 3:10](#)). But if we come to God on the basis of faith in Jesus rather than on the basis of our own works, then God will credit us as being righteous. He can do so because the death Jesus suffered paid the penalty for our sins ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

TAKING THE PLUNGE

A thin wire trailed high above a muddy river. Our friends waited on the opposite shore for me to entrust my safety to the ramshackle zip line. No amount of praying and pleading, whining and wheedling changed the situation. I just had to take the plunge and jump.

That experience has proved helpful many times since. There comes a point when we’ve done enough thinking and talking. Then it’s time to trust God and step out in faith. Marriage. Having children. Working in an African refugee camp. God has lists for us.

Abraham is a hero and model in taking the plunge of faith. He began by obeying God’s command to leave his homeland, and so he “went, even though he did not know where he was going” ([Hebrews 11:8](#)). What a leap of faith! But he didn’t stop there. When God asked him to believe the impossible, that even in his childless old age he would have more descendants than he could count, Abraham chose to let go of his fears and believe. As a result, God “credited it to him as righteousness” ([Genesis 15:6](#)).

Is there anything that God wants you to do but you are putting it off? If so, why?

—D. & L. G.

III. Affirmation

(GENESIS 15:17-21)

In the intervening verses not addressed in today's lesson ([Genesis 15:7-16](#)), the Lord speaks of granting to Abraham the land of Canaan. Abraham requests and receives assurance in this regard. The response begins with the Lord's directive that Abraham arrange for a sacrifice of livestock and birds in a certain way.

HOW TO SAY IT

Amorites *Am-uh-rites*.

Canaanites *Kay-nun-ites*.

Eliezer *El-ih-ee-zer*.

Euphrates *You-fray-teez*.

Girgashites *Gur-guh-shites*.

Hittites *Hit-ites* or *Hit-tites*.

Jebusites *Jeb-yuh-sites*.

Kadmonites *Kadd-mun-ites*.

Kenizzites *Ken-cz-zites* or *Ken-uh-zites*.

Melchizedek *Mel-kiz-eh-dek*.

Nuzi *New-zee*.

Perizzites *Pair-ih-zites*.

Pharaoh *Fair-o* or *Fay-roe*.

Rephaites *Ref-uh-ites*.

At sunset Abraham falls into a deep sleep. Then God speaks and gives Abraham what may be called a future history of the man's descendants. The land in which Abraham now resides will indeed become the home of his descendants, but only after a period of 400 years in bondage in another land. Ironically Abraham has already been in that land, Egypt ([Genesis 12:10-20](#)).

A. Concluding a Ceremony (v. 17)

^{17a}. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen,

Here we are given the conclusion of what Abraham sees during his deep sleep that begins in [Genesis 15:12](#). What happens there occurs "as the sun was setting"; what happens now occurs *when the sun had set*. So now the sun is fully below the horizon, and it is dark. The fact that another night is falling (that is, in addition to the night of [Genesis 15:5](#)) is not problematic given the visionary nature of what Abraham is seeing. A vision, like a dream, can occur outside of normal time limitations.

^{17b}. a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

The presence of smoke and/or fire signifies at times in Scripture the presence of God ([Exodus 3:1, 2](#); [Psalm 18:8](#)). This will be especially true at Mount Sinai ([Exodus 19:18](#)) when God will establish a covenant with the descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel (next week's lesson). *The pieces* to which the verse before us refers are parts of the animals sacrificed in [Genesis 15:10](#).

B. Confirming a Covenant (vv. 18-21)

^{18a}. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land,

To us, the actions of [Genesis 15:9-17](#) may seem rather bizarre as a backdrop to the making of the covenant now mentioned. An explanation will help us connect the dots.

In the ancient world, animals were often used as visual aids in the process of making or ratifying treaties or covenants. For example, the ruler of a certain nation might say to a conquered people, "Here is what will happen to you if you dare to rebel against me"; and he would then break the leg or the neck of a sheep or other animal.

Similar, but reversing the direction, are cases when a person takes a certain vow and says something like "May this happen to me if I fail to keep my promise"—and then proceeds to break the animal's leg or neck. These are called self-maledictory oaths: the maker invokes harm on self should he fail to carry through.

This latter is the type of covenant God seems to be making with Abraham. Essentially, God's promise is this: "May what has happened to these animals [that have been cut in pieces] happen to me if I do not keep my promise of land to you." Of course, God cannot be "cut up" since he has no physical body ([John 4:24](#)). But the Lord is speaking to Abraham in terms that the man understands in his time and place. As Abraham gets the message, he will see clearly how committed God is to keeping his promise.

What Do You Think?

In light of your own experiences of delayed answers to prayer, in what ways can you help others trust God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding spiritually mature believers

Regarding new believers

Regarding unbelievers

^{18b}. "from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—

The Lord establishes the future boundaries of the promised land. Many assume that *the Wadi of Egypt* refers to the Nile River because of its prominence. However, the Wadi el-Arish, which separates Palestine and Egypt, is more likely. The distance between these two rivers is some 400 miles at their closest points. Boundaries such as outlined here will be realized as a result of King David's battle conquests centuries later.

¹⁹⁻²¹. “the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

Our lesson text concludes with a listing of various peoples whom the Israelites will confront when they enter Canaan after 400 years in bondage ([Genesis 15:13](#)). In other references, only one such group may be mentioned in order to highlight some especially offensive behavior on its part (example: “the sin of the Amorites” in [15:16](#)). Also, some passages include groups not listed here (example: the Hivites in [Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5](#); etc.). See overlapping lists in [Exodus 3:8, 17; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deuteronomy 20:17; Joshua 3:10; 9:1; 11:3; 12:8; 24:11; Judges 3:5; 1 Kings 9:20; 2 Chronicles 8:7; Ezra 9:1](#); and [Nehemiah 9:8](#).

Old Testament history makes clear that none of these “-ites” end up being the most serious threat to God’s people. Rather, the Israelites themselves become their own worst enemy. That happens when they fail to follow the Lord, when they do not live as descendants of Abraham should.

What Do You Think?

How do we deal with situations of greater difficulties as we try to follow God’s leading?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering how Bible people reacted in God-honoring ways ([Acts 4:19; 2 Corinthians 6:3-10; 2 Timothy 3:10-13; 4:6-8; Hebrews 11](#); etc.)

Considering how Bible people reacted in ineffective or sinful ways ([Genesis 16:1-4; Jonah 1:1-3; Mark 14:66-72; Galatians 2:11-13](#); etc.)

Conclusion

A. Join the Club

Most Bible students are aware of how Abraham is highlighted in Scripture because of his faith. Abraham’s faith takes up more verses in [Hebrews 11](#) (commonly called “the faith chapter”) than anyone else’s. Yet Abraham’s faith clearly was not perfect. In addition to problems noted in the Lesson Background, today’s lesson reveals the man expressing concerns as to whether God will keep his promise of offspring. Abraham then voiced a desire for some kind of guarantee that God would fulfill the promise of land. So where is this man’s exemplary faith?

The Bible does not hide the weaknesses or failures of even its staunchest heroes and heroines of faith. As Abraham had his struggles, so did Moses ([Numbers 11:10-15](#)), Miriam ([Numbers 12](#)), Elijah ([1 Kings 19:1-4, 14](#)), John the Baptist ([Matthew 11:1-6](#)), and Peter ([Matthew 26:69-75](#)). Such examples can be a source of encouragement when our faith walk is more of a limp. At such times we are in good company.

These individuals did not stagnate. The Abraham who stumbled at times eventually became the Abraham willing to place his son on the sacrificial altar in obedience to God’s command; the Peter who denied Jesus eventually became the Peter who died a martyr’s death; etc.

Abraham was not a man of perfect faith. Yet never is the statement of [Genesis 15:6](#) revoked: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

B. Prayer

Father, the challenges to faith in our time can be intimidating. We find ourselves pleading with the disciples of Jesus, “Increase our faith!” Use our daily contacts and circumstances to shape us into people who model true faith to a skeptical world. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith keeps one focused on the faithfulness of God.

Some Bible Covenants

NAME	SCRIPTURE	SUBSTANCE OF COVENANT
 The Covenant in Eden	Genesis 2:9, 15-17	Adam and Eve would live forever in paradise if they did not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
 The Covenant with Noah	Genesis 8:20–9:17	God would never again destroy the earth by flood
 The Covenant with Abraham	Genesis 12:1-3	Abraham would have a multitude of descendants, would have a land in which to live, and would be a blessing to all the earth
 The Old (Mosaic) Covenant	Exodus 31:12-18	God gave Israel laws for all aspects of life
 The Covenant with David	2 Samuel 7:4-17; Luke 1:30-33; 2:12	God promised that the rule of David's line would never end
 The New Covenant	Hebrews 8:7-13; Jeremiah 31:27-34	Salvation is available through Jesus

Sheet 5—Fall 2017, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 5. Use this chart as a starting point to compare and contrast the new covenant with various Old Testament covenants.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

To begin class, write this definition on the board: “a voluntary, deliberate, and legally binding agreement between two or more competent parties.”

Ask class members to identify the term defined by that description. Of course, it is a *contract*. Briefly discuss the types of contracts your learners have entered

into.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Document Needed” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs to identify items and services that usually have a contract associated with them.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “We sign contracts to buy houses, obtain jobs, finance cars, purchase insurance, and for a host of other reasons. Today we will look at a covenant or contract that God entered into with Abraham.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups, giving each group pen and paper and a portion of the Bible text. Say, “Twitter used to be unique among social media websites because at one time it limited the length of messages sent on it. Each message (or ‘tweet’) could contain no more than 140 characters. Let’s see if you can summarize or explain a portion of today’s text as a tweet of no more than 140 characters.”

Assign Scripture to be summarized as follows. Examples are in italics.

Group 1—Abram expressing his concern about God’s promise (Genesis 15:1-3)

God promises me protection and wealth. But what good is it if I cannot pass it along to my descendants? My estate will go to someone outside of my family after I die! (134 characters)

Group 2—God assuring Abram that the promise will be kept (Genesis 15:4-6)

I promised Abram a descendant and he will get one. In fact, no one will be able to count the number of his descendants. And all he has to do to get this gift is to trust in me! (138 characters)

Group 3—A reporter telling about the sealing of the covenant (Genesis 15:17-21)

After sunset, God affirmed his covenant by passing as fire and smoke through Abram’s sacrifice. God set the boundaries of the land Abram’s descendants would inherit. (140 characters)

After group work is complete, have groups share their tweets and summarize their Scripture assignments.

Into Life

Say, “Abram was assured that God’s promises to him would be handed down from generation to generation. This included parents teaching their own children, but it also included the entire community of Israel coming together to pass God’s truth to succeeding generations. What does that mean for us today?”

Close this session by brainstorming a list of ways they can ensure that future generations are not denied access to the covenant promises of God. Some ideas would include volunteering in the church nursery, assisting with the church’s children’s programs, participating in intergenerational service projects, organizing an adopt-a-grandparent ministry, offering to help a single parent, etc.

When the list is complete, have students consider accepting one or more tasks.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Transfer of Ownership” activity from the reproducible page. Have students look up the Scriptures referred to in the activity and match them with a way to pass faith to the next generation.

Close either activity with prayer that the Lord’s church remain strong from generation to generation.