

The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant

An Everlasting Covenant

Lesson #4 for April 24, 2021

Scriptures: Exodus 3:14; Genesis 15:7-18; 17:1-14; 41:45; Daniel 1:7; Revelation 14: 6-7.

1. Think about the challenges God has had down through the generations with our sin-sick world. He began with a perfect garden in a perfect world with Adam and Eve. Before very many years, He had to destroy that whole world in a flood and restart with Noah. And, after a relatively few years, things were so bad again that He had to choose Abram/Abraham (referred to as Abraham or Abram/Abraham in this handout except when discussing the change of his name as recorded in Genesis 17 or in quotations using *Abram*), calling him away from the evil influences of his family and his environment to restart yet again.
2. He tried several times to work with the descendants of Abraham. Following God's directions, Moses took them out of Egyptian captivity. Zerubbabel and Joshua and a very small percentage of the Israelites went back to Palestine after the Babylonian captivity.
3. In New Testament times, Jesus had to admit that His efforts for the Israelites had been largely unsuccessful. So, He restarted with the Christian church. That Christian church had a marvelous beginning with the apostles and disciples, but deteriorated until needing the Protestant Reformation which reemphasized the necessity of following Scripture alone. But, after another 300 years, the Protestant churches were not much different from the "mother church" they had left. Finally, following the great Advent Awakening, Seventh-day Adventists arose. Are we going to succeed even though so many in the past have failed?
4. Repeatedly, through the generations, God has reached out to the human race, offering promises and covenants. In this lesson we will focus primarily on His relationship with Abraham. It was God's first recorded opportunity to spell out in considerable detail what He had in mind for the plan of salvation.
5. What can we learn about God from His names? What do the different names mean? Why did God change Abram's name to Abraham?
6. Down through the generations, names have been associated with movements, truths, and ideas. What comes to mind when you think of Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, or Dorcas from the Bible?
7. The Semitic peoples in the Old Testament, dwelling in the Near East, attached great importance to the meaning of people's names.

The Hebrews always thought of a name as indicating either the personal characteristics of the one named, or the thoughts and emotions of the one giving the name, or attendant circumstances at the time the name was given.—Article on Exodus 6:3. In F. D. Nichol (Ed.), *The SDA Bible Commentary*,* vol. 1, 523.3.

8. When God first approached Abraham, He identified Himself under the name *YHWH/Yahweh* as recorded in Genesis 15:7.

The name YHWH, though appearing 6,828 times in the Old Testament, is somewhat shrouded in mystery. It seems to be a form of the verb *hayah*, 'to be,' in which case it would mean "the Eternal One," "the Existent One," "the Self-Existing One," "the Self-Sufficient One," or "the One who lives eternally."

The divine attributes that seem to be emphasized by this title are those

of self-existence and faithfulness. They point to the Lord as the living God, the Source of life, in contrast with the gods of the heathen, which had no existence apart from the imagination of their worshipers.—Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sunday, April 18.^{†§}

9. When God approached Moses in the desert while he was herding sheep, He appeared in a burning bush and asked Moses to remove his shoes. When Moses asked who He was, God said, “I am who I am.” What would a name like that mean? (See Exodus 3:14.) This name implies not only that God is the eternal, everlasting God, but also that He is a personal Friend to humans. God wanted Moses and, earlier, Abraham to know His name.
10. So, what comes to mind when you think of the name *Yahweh*, *Jehovah*, or *God*? Do you think of love? Kindness? And care? Or, do you think of fear? Strictness? And discipline? When thinking about the names of God, **it is very important for us to remember that the God of the Old Testament was Jesus Christ!** We must never forget that! (See Luke 24:44; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; and John 5:39.)
11. But, we need to understand that there are many different names given to God in the Old Testament. In addition to the names *Elohim* and *Yahweh*, another name appears for God: *'El Shaddai*. The name *'El Shaddai* was used almost exclusively by Moses in the books of Genesis and Job, the very first books he wrote.

A literal translation of Genesis 17:1-6 would be: **“Jehovah appeared to Abram, and said, ‘I am *'El-Shaddai*; walk before Me, and be thou perfect; and I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . . And thou shalt be a father of a multitude of nations, . . . and I will make thee exceedingly fruitful.’”** This same name also appears in **Genesis 28:3**, where Isaac says that *'El-Shaddai* will bless Jacob, make him fruitful, and multiply him.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, April 19.^{†§}

***'El-Shaddai* first appears in the Hebrew text of Genesis 17:1, 2, associated with Abraham. The word for God here is *'El-'El-Shaddai*, often translated as “God Almighty.”—Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* 52.^{†§}**

Genesis 17:1-2: ¹When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am the Almighty God [*'El-Shaddai*]. Obey me and always do what is right. ²I will make my covenant with you and give you many descendants.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Genesis 17:1-2). New York: American Bible Society.[‡] [Remember that at that time, Abram/Abraham had no descendant!][‡]

Let’s break it down a bit. The word *'El* is related to *Elohim* (“In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth.”), and **it stands for omnipotence, might, and transcendence. This title for God, *Elohim*, is seen all through the Genesis Creation account. The word *'El*, from it, is translated “God” about two hundred times; it, too, connoted the powerful God.**

***Shaddai*—it means “breast,” giving the idea of one who supplies, who nourishes, and who satisfies. Connected with the word *'El*, it portrays the notion of “the mighty and powerful One who can supply and nourish.”—Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* 52.^{†§}**

12. There are a number of verses in the Bible that use the expression 'El or 'El-Shaddai which is often translated "Almighty God." See Genesis 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 49:25; etc.
13. Does God really need to tell us that He is Almighty? Would we want to worship a God known as the "weak god"? Or, the "frail god"? Or, the "fish god"? Or, the "goat god"?
14. People in the ancient Near East often chose names very carefully. See also item #33 below.

Though the names of God come with spiritual and theological significance, such usage does not end with God alone. Names of people in the ancient Near East were not just meaningless forms of identification, as often they are to us. To name a girl *Mary* or *Susy* does not make much of a difference today. For the ancient Semites, however, human names came heavy-laden with spiritual significance. All Semitic names of people have meaning and usually consist of a phrase or short sentence comprised of a wish or an expression of gratitude on the part of the parent. For example, *Daniel* means "God is my judge"; *Joel* means "Yahweh is God"; *Nathan* means "Gift of God."—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, April 20.[§]

15. In more modern times, people are inclined to give nicknames to others. It is very difficult to change one's legal name; so, we usually ignore it and substitute a nickname for a person. So, what do we understand when we see God changing the name of Abram which means "father is exalted" to Abraham which means "father of a multitude." How does this relate to God's covenant promise to us and to Abraham?
16. Imagine God—having promised Abraham several times after he was 75 years of age that He would give him many children, and, finally, at the age of 99, married to a woman who had long since been menopausal—repeating the promise that he would be the father of many peoples!
17. Let us dig a little deeper into the idea of *covenant*.

Genesis 12:1-2,7: ¹The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. ²I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing...."

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "This is the country that I am going to give to your descendants."—*Good News Bible*.*

In those two verses [Genesis 12:1-2], the first stage of God's covenant promise to Abram (there are three) is revealed. **God approached Abram, gave him a command and then made him a promise.** The *approach* expresses God's gracious election of Abram to be the first major figure of His special covenant of grace. The *command* involves the test of total trust in God (*Heb. 11:8*). The *promise* (*Genesis 12:1-3, 7*), though made specifically to Abram's descendants, ultimately includes a promise to the whole human race (*Genesis 12:3, Gal. 3:6-9*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, April 21.^{†§}

18. In order to better understand God's covenant promises and relationship with Abraham, consider Hebrews 11:8 and Genesis 12:1-3,7. These verses point out the first phase of God's covenant promise. God gave Abraham a command and then promised to bless him if he followed it.

Genesis 15:7-20: ⁷ Then the LORD said to him, "I am the LORD, who led you out

of Ur in Babylonia [the Chaldees], to give you this land as your own.”

⁸ But Abram asked, “Sovereign LORD, how can I know that it will be mine?”

⁹ He answered, “**Bring me a cow, a goat, and a ram, each of them three years old, and a dove and a pigeon.**” ¹⁰Abram brought the animals to God, cut them in half, and placed the halves opposite each other in two rows; but he did not cut up the birds. ¹¹Vultures came down on the bodies, but Abram drove them off.

¹² When the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and fear and terror came over him. ¹³The LORD said to him, “Your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land; they will be slaves there and will be treated cruelly for four hundred years. ¹⁴**But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and when they leave that foreign land, they will take great wealth with them.** ¹⁵**You yourself will live to a ripe old age, die in peace, and be buried.** ¹⁶**It will be four generations before your descendants come back here, because I will not drive out the Amorites until they become so wicked that they must be punished.**”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and it was dark, **a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch** suddenly appeared and passed between the pieces of the animals. ¹⁸Then and there the LORD made a covenant with Abram. He said, “**I promise to give your descendants all this land from the border of Egypt to the River Euphrates,** ¹⁹including the lands of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”—*Good News Bible*. *†‡

19. This passage is an expansion on what God had said to Abraham earlier. Notice that God appeared to Abraham, probably in a vision, and then called him to obey certain commands that God gave him, followed by a divine promise of great blessing.
20. So, why that strange ceremony of cutting animals in half, laying them on the ground, and passing between them? Recent archaeological evidence has demonstrated that this was a common way to enter into a serious agreement among the people from whom Abraham came. **God was meeting him where he was.** It is believed that cutting the animals in half and laying them on the ground implied that if one broke the covenant, this is what would happen to him. Today, we would ask a lawyer to draw up a document or a legal document.
21. Finally, when Abraham was 99 years old, we come to the third and final stage of the divine covenant God made with him.
22. When he was 99 years old and it seemed almost impossible for Abraham to have his own children—especially from Sarah,—God appeared to him for the third covenant-making experience. In effect, God said: “Obey me and always do what is right; and if you do, I will change your name. I will make an everlasting covenant with you **to give you and your many descendants the territory from the Euphrates to Egypt.**” Moreover, that covenant was to be an everlasting covenant, applying to all who would be Abraham’s descendants.

Galatians 3:7,29: ⁷You should realize then, that the real descendants of Abraham are the people who have faith....

²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.—*Good News Bible*. *

23. How do you think that relates to the famous first angel’s message recorded in **Revelation God’s Covenant #4** - page 4 of 8

14:6-7? Is the Almighty God still speaking? How many people are included in His promise? What do we have to do to be a part of it?

24. Abraham was asked to follow some of God's instructions which, at times, may have seemed almost impossible to carry out.

God called Abraham to be a teacher of His word, He chose him to be the father of a great nation, because He saw that Abraham would instruct his children and his household in the principles of God's law. And that which gave power to Abraham's teaching was the influence of his own life. His great household consisted of more than a thousand souls, many of them heads of families, and not a few but newly converted from heathenism. Such a household required a firm hand at the helm. No weak, vacillating methods would suffice. Of Abraham God said, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him." Genesis 18:19. Yet his authority was exercised with such wisdom and tenderness that hearts were won. The testimony of the divine Watcher is, "They shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." Genesis 18:19. And Abraham's influence extended beyond his own household. Wherever he pitched his tent, he set up beside it the altar for sacrifice and worship. When the tent was removed, the altar remained; and many a roving Canaanite, whose knowledge of God had been gained from the life of Abraham His servant, tarried at that altar to offer sacrifice to Jehovah.—Ellen G. White, *Education** 187.2.†

Abraham's household comprised more than a thousand souls. Those who were led by his teachings to worship the one God, found a home in his encampment; and here, as in a school, they received such instruction as would prepare them to be representatives of the true faith. Thus a great responsibility rested upon him. He was training heads of families, and his methods of government would be carried out in the households over which they should preside.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 141.1.† [Abraham was running a university!][‡]

25. Sometimes, we as human beings tend to think that we have to do everything ourselves. But, God's promises are way beyond the capacity of any human group to accomplish on their own. Thus, we need God's grace. Abraham needed God's grace. But, we still need to press on and do our best to carry out our part of the agreement.

Genesis 18:19: "I have chosen him in order that he may command his sons and his descendants to obey me and to do what is right and just. If they do, I will do everything for him that I have promised."—*Good News Bible*.*†

James 2:17: So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.—*Good News Bible*.*†

26. So, what do you think? Did God ask too much of Abraham? Is God asking too much of us?
27. Are we keeping God's covenant? Or, are we breaking it? How do you break a covenant? By unfaithfulness, disobedience, and ignoring the established relationship. But, notice that it is not the conditions of bestowal that are violated, but rather, the condition of fulfillment. The covenant is still available. If we do not follow through with obedience, we lose.
28. Think of the complete story of the Israelites as recorded in the Old Testament and how

because of their disobedience and rebellion they forfeited receiving God's ultimate blessing.

29. In our last lesson, we studied how the rainbow was a promise to Noah and his descendants. **In this lesson, we are focused on Abraham and the necessity of circumcision. What was the point of circumcision?**

Circumcision "was destined: (1) to distinguish the seed of Abraham from the Gentiles (*Eph. 2:11*), (2) to perpetuate the memory of Jehovah's covenant (*Gen. 17:11*), (3) to foster the cultivation of moral purity (*Deut. 10:16*), (4) to represent righteousness by faith (*Rom. 4:11*), (5) to symbolize circumcision of the heart (*Rom. 2:29*), and (6) to foreshadow the Christian rite of baptism (*Col. 2:11, 12*)."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pp, 322, 323.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, April 23].^{†§}

Genesis 17:10: [God said:] "You and your descendants must all agree to circumcise every male among you."—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

30. **While the rainbow continues to signify God's promise to all human beings for all eternity, the requirement of circumcision is no longer a necessary requirement for the people of God.** By New Testament times, the meaning of circumcision had mostly been lost. Notice what Paul said about circumcision.

Romans 4:11: He was circumcised later, and his circumcision was a sign to show that **because of his faith God had accepted him as righteous before he had been circumcised.** And so Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe in God and are accepted as righteous by him, even though they are not circumcised.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

Galatians 5:6: For when we are in union with Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor the lack of it makes any difference at all; **what matters is faith that works through love.**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

Galatians 6:15: It does not matter at all whether or not one is circumcised; **what does matter is being a new creature.**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

1 Corinthians 7:18-19: ¹⁸If a circumcised man has accepted God's call, he should not try to remove the marks of circumcision; if an uncircumcised man has accepted God's call, he should not get circumcised. ¹⁹**For whether or not a man is circumcised means nothing; what matters is to obey God's commandments.**—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

31. As modern day Christians who study our Bibles, we have come to believe that we are saved by faith, that covenant relationship that is possible with God. But, let us never forget that faith works. A faith that does not lead to action on the part of a Christian is a dead faith.

Many are still tested as was Abraham. They do not hear the voice of God speaking directly from the heavens, but He calls them by the teachings of His word and the events of His providence. They may be required to abandon a career that promises wealth and honor, to leave congenial and profitable associations and separate from kindred, to enter upon what appears to be only a path of self-denial, hardship, and sacrifice. God has a work for them to do; but a life of ease and the influence of friends and kindred would hinder the development of the very traits essential for its accomplishment. He calls them away from human influences and aid, and leads them to feel the need of His help, and to depend upon Him alone, that He may reveal Himself to them. Who is ready at the call of Providence to renounce cherished plans and

familiar associations?—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 126.4-127.0.

32. What aspects of that covenant agreement with Abraham are still everlasting?
33. Is it fair to say that what we read in Genesis 17:3-5 with the changing of his name indicates a change in the relationship between God and Abraham? Similar to item #14 above:

Abram was the first of several men whose names God changed. Names were of much greater importance to the ancients than they are to us. All Semitic names have meanings, and usually consist of a phrase or sentence that expresses a wish, or perhaps gratitude, on the part of the parent. In view of the importance people themselves attached to names, God changed the names of certain men to make them harmonize with their experiences, past or future. **Abram, meaning “exalted father,” does not appear in this form elsewhere in the Bible, but is found under the form Abiram, meaning “my father is exalted”** (see Num. 16:1; 1 Kings 16:34).—Article on Genesis 17:5. In F. D. Nichol (Ed.), *The SDA Bible Commentary*,* vol. 1, 321.†

34. It is interesting to note that there are others with the same name mentioned in Numbers 16:1-2 and 1 Kings 16:34. But, in those passages, the name is spelled *Abiram*.
35. Let us review now the three-stage covenant that God made with Abraham.

“God made a three-stage covenant with Abraham. The first is reported in Genesis 12:1-3; the second in Genesis 15:1-21; and the third in Genesis 17:1-14.”—Gerhard M. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, p. 34.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 53].^{‡§}

36. First of all, God called Abram/Abraham to leave his country and his people and travel to an unknown land. But, He promised to give him a glorious group of descendants.
37. God came again to Abraham and asked him to do that very strong covenant-making agreement, and God in the form of a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between the cut pieces of animals. Do you think Abraham was frightened when he saw that? Did he understand that God was making an agreement with him?
38. Despite all that, Abraham still did not have a child by Sarah.

Genesis 17:1-14: ¹ When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am the Almighty God. Obey me and always do what is right. ²I will make my covenant with you and give you many descendants.” ³Abram bowed down with his face touching the ground, and God said, ⁴“I make this covenant with you: I promise that you will be the ancestor of many nations. ⁵Your name will no longer be Abram, but Abraham, because I am making you the ancestor of many nations. ⁶I will give you many descendants, and some of them will be kings. You will have so many descendants that they will become nations.

⁷ “I will keep my promise to you and to your descendants in future generations as an everlasting covenant. I will be your God and the God of your descendants. ⁸I will give to you and to your descendants this land in which you are now a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants for ever, and I will be their God.”

⁹ God said to Abraham, “You also must agree to keep the covenant with me, both you and your descendants in future generations. ¹⁰You and your

descendants **must all agree to circumcise every male among you.**

¹¹⁻¹²From now on you must circumcise every baby boy when he is eight days old, including slaves born in your homes and slaves bought from foreigners. This will show that there is a covenant between you and me. ¹³Each one must be circumcised, and this will be a physical sign to show that my covenant with you is everlasting. ¹⁴Any male who has not been circumcised will no longer be considered one of my people, because he has not kept the covenant with me.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

39. When Abraham was 99 years old, (Genesis 17) God came back and said it was time to have the promised son. And so, God asked Abraham to begin the process of circumcision to distinguish Abraham and his descendants from the fertility-cult-worshiping nations around them.
40. Would you still have trusted God after He had promised again and again to give you a child by Sarah even when she was past childbearing age? Is it any surprise that both Abraham and Sarah laughed at God’s promises? And Sarah went on to lie to God about having laughed! (Genesis 17:17; 18:10-15) Then, they named their son *Isaac* or *Laughter*.
41. **Abraham’s final test came when he was 120 years of age.** He was asked to take that precious son, Isaac, to a country three days journey away to sacrifice him. Abraham went, of course. Fortunately, as his hand was raised with a knife, ready to do the terrible deed, God withheld the hand and provided the substitute.

For Abraham, “This was the primary reason for naming the scene of this event Jehovah-jireh. It was a constant reminder of the wonderful grace of the Jehovah who had wrought this deliverance. . . . What a great and glorious deliverance it was that Jehovah’s grace had provided, and how unexpected and dramatic! **Man’s extremity is ever God’s opportunity, not only for deliverance but to teach also wonderful lessons of His purpose as well as providence.**”—Nathan Stone, *Names of God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1944), pp. 62, 63.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 54.]^{†§}

42. Do you know what your name means? What language did it come from? In the Bible, God went to extraordinary lengths, sometimes even changing people’s names, so they could represent what He wanted to say to/through them. Thus, He is making Himself as personal as possible to His followers. God’s promises are gestures of intimacy.
43. We are told that God knows not only our names, but He also counts the number of hairs on our heads! (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7)
44. In response, how well do we know God? We have already studied several passages suggesting that the key to an everlasting relationship with God and eternal life is to know God well. (See Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 17:3.)
45. Many Christians, perhaps rightfully, like to focus on God’s love and His forgiveness of all their sins. But, if God is all-merciful and all-forgiving, does He still require us to actually keep His commandments? Does He need our obedience? Do we believe that the greatest happiness comes to those who obey Him?

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