

# Reading: The Covenant of Grace (Dr. Roels)

## LESSON TWO: THE COVENANT OF GRACE

### INTRODUCTION

Shortly after God scattered the people who had built the Tower of Babel, He chose to work out His plan of salvation by limiting His special revelation primarily to one person and his descendants. The person God chose for this very special honor and responsibility was a man named Abram (later called Abraham). God's ultimate purpose in choosing Abraham was not simply to bless this man and his descendants. Rather, His primary purpose in working through Abraham was to bring salvation to all people on earth. Eventually, a child would be born in the line of Abraham who would be the Savior of the world. That person was God's own Son who took on human form when He was born on earth to a young Jewish girl in the city of David in the land of Israel (Luke 2:10-11). This Holy Child was given the name "Jesus" (meaning "the Lord saves") because He would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

### GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

When God called Abraham to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeans (in an area known today as Iraq), God gave him a very special promise. God said, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

What a fantastic promise that was! God had never promised anything like that to anyone before. But why did God choose **Abraham** for this special blessing? Had he worked hard for it? Did he earn it somehow? Did he have a record of great accomplishments? Did his family have a long history of loving and serving God?

The answer to all those questions is a very strong NO! We know very little about Abraham's ancestors other than the fact that they apparently were idol worshipers (Joshua 24:2 and 24:15). God definitely did not call Abraham because of his merits or worthiness. God called him because of **His grace**. And when God called Abraham to leave his fatherland and go to a new land where he had never been before, Abraham trusted God and did what God had told him to do.

It was **by faith** that Abraham went out to the land of Canaan and it was **by faith** that he continued to trust and obey God throughout his life, even when he was tested and challenged over and over again. Because of that steadfast faith in the promises of God, Abraham is referred to in the New Testament as the **father of all believers**-- people who trusted God, believed His promises, and obeyed His commands (Romans 4:11).

### Blessing and Cursing

When God called Abraham, he not only promised to bless *him* and his descendants. He also promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and to curse those who cursed him (Genesis 12:1-3). The reason for that was not primarily for the personal benefit of Abraham. Rather, God promised that the coming Redeemer would some day be born into Abraham's family. Therefore, any person or nation who protected or blessed Abraham and his descendants would receive special blessing from God. However, those who interfered with God's plan of redemption by opposing Abraham and his descendants or by enticing them to forget their God would face condemnation and destruction. By destroying those who opposed His "chosen people" and blessing those who favored them, God **graciously** preserved His people and continued to carry out His divine plan to redeem the nations of the world through them.

*(Read the history of the people of Israel in the books of Joshua and Judges in the light of God's purpose and plan.)*

### **God's Ultimate Purpose**

God wonderfully blessed Abraham and his descendants in many ways. However, God's ultimate purpose in choosing Abraham was not simply to shower blessings on this one family. God's purpose was to bless the entire world through them. He would do that in two ways.

First and foremost, God would bless the entire world by providing a Savior for all who would believe in Him. And this ultimate purpose would surely be fulfilled, even though Satan would often seek to destroy Abraham's descendants or cause them to deny, disobey, or distrust their God.

Secondly, the people of Israel were called to live lives of faith and holiness as *examples* to the rest of the world. They alone had God's laws and God's promises and they were called to demonstrate to the rest of the world what it meant to live as the children of the one true God. Regrettably, however, this second purpose was not always fulfilled.

God never promised Abraham that all his descendants would be faithful and obedient. They obviously weren't! They often wandered away from God, living lives of selfishness, unholiness, pride, and disobedience. They even forgot God on many occasions and chose to worship other gods instead. When that happened, God punished them just as He punished other nations who opposed Him. However, when Israel repented and earnestly turned back to the Lord again, God **graciously** forgave them. But whether they were obedient or not, God was always faithful to His ultimate purpose to provide a Redeemer in their family line.

### **THE PROMISE OF A SON**

In Genesis 13:14-16 we read that God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth--even though he had no children at the time.. The amazing thing about this promise is that Abraham was getting older and his wife Sarah was not able to have children. In spite of that, however, Abraham, as always, believed what God had promised.

However, as time went on and his wife remained childless, Abraham assumed that God was going to raise up descendants for him through the family of his trusted servant. But that was definitely not God's plan! God said to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir" (Genesis 15:4). Then God took Abraham outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them . . . So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). Even though Abraham had no idea how this would be possible, he **believed** what God said, and the Lord "credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

Here, as always, God's promises were given before Abraham's obedience--not afterwards. It was God's **grace**, not Abraham's faith and obedience that came first. Earlier he had left his homeland and left for far off Canaan in **faith** that God would truly bless him in the new land. On the way to Canaan he left most of his family behind in Syria, and **by faith** he went on to travel without them (Genesis 11:31-32). When he lived in the land of Canaan he let his nephew Lot choose whatever part of the land he wanted for himself (Genesis 13:1-12) since he **believed** that God would graciously grant him everything He had promised. Abraham's obedience always followed from his faith and his faith always followed from God's gracious promises. God's **grace** always came first!

### **ABRAHAM'S FAITH**

Several years later, when God promised Abraham that he and his wife Sarah would have a son together, Abraham again **believed** what God promised--even though by this time he was very old and his wife was well beyond the normal child-bearing years. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul describes the situation this way: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope **believed** and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his **faith** and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God has power to do what He had promised" (Romans 4:18-21).

Since both Abraham and Sarah were physically incapable of bearing children at that point, it was obvious that God would have to perform a great miracle if they were ever to have a child. By waiting until there seemed to be no hope at all that Abraham and Sarah would have a child of their own, God demonstrated that He himself would be the one who would make salvation possible. Abraham obviously had to obey as well as trust, but the birth of the promised child was clearly a divine gift from the Lord--another demonstration that salvation would always be a gift of God's **grace**.

### **THE COVENANT OF GRACE**

After Abraham lived in the land of Canaan for a number of years, God gave him a great and wonderful promise which is often referred to as the Covenant of Grace. In **Genesis 12:1-3**, we read that God had promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation, that he would make Abraham's own name great, and that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. In **Genesis 15** God promised him that he would have a son, a multitude of descendants, and that the land of Canaan would be his inheritance. In **Genesis 17:1-8** God formally established "The Covenant of Grace" with Abraham, promising that He would be his God and the God of his descendants for generations to come. God said, "I

will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God" (Genesis 17:6-7). God also promised that he would give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession and that He would be their God (Genesis 17:8).

Abraham believed that God would do everything He promised. His promises would result in wonderful blessings for Abraham, but the greatest blessing would be that all people throughout the world would be blessed through him and his descendants (Genesis 12:3). This wonderful promise of grace was repeated on various occasions in the Old Testament and again in the New Testament. (See Psalm 72:17; Acts 3:25; Galatians 3:8-9.) All these special promises to Abraham clearly demonstrated that mankind would be saved **by God's grace** and not by human effort.

### **The Sign and Seal of the Covenant**

God determined that the Covenant promise in Genesis 17 was to be sealed by the sign of circumcision (Genesis 17:14). This was not an arbitrary sign and neither was it optional. (See Acts 7:8 where the covenant of grace is referred to as the "covenant of circumcision.") The people of Israel always regarded circumcision as the distinguishing mark of the "chosen people" and they looked down upon all those who were not circumcised. (See, for example, Exodus 12:48 and Judges 14:3.) All adult male converts from non-Jewish nations had to be circumcised if they were to be included as members of the family of God. Even after the death and resurrection of Christ, many Jewish believers still insisted that non-Jewish converts to Christianity had to be circumcised (Acts 15:5).

Since the line of promise was continued among the people of Israel through the male in the family, the sign of the covenant was given only to male children. (See the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 where some of the most prominent Jewish mothers, such as Sarah, are not listed.)

As a sign of the Covenant of Grace, circumcision was particularly relevant for the people of Israel for at least three reasons.

- (1) The covenant sign would be intimately involved in the procreation of the children God promised to bless. Each time a child was conceived, the seed of the father would pass through the sign of the covenant even before the child was born. Each child was thus "holy unto the Lord" from the time of conception. (See Genesis 17:7, 10-14).
- (2) Circumcision was a sign of the removal of defilement or impurity. The physical act of circumcision was significant, but it was of minimal value for those whose **spiritual** impurity or defilement was not removed. (See Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26; and Romans 2:28-29.)
- (3) Circumcision involved the shedding of blood. Parents were reminded that each child, even though a child of covenant promise, was born in sin (see Psalm 51:5) and that cleansing and forgiveness would ultimately be possible only through the shedding of blood.

Circumcision was faithfully practiced by the people of Israel and also by Gentile converts throughout the Old Testament. It was not until Jesus provided the perfect sacrifice for our sins that the shedding of blood was no longer necessary and circumcision was no longer of any spiritual value (Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6, and Galatians 6:15.)

### **ABRAHAM and HIS SON ISAAC**

When Abraham's son Isaac was a teen-ager, God told Abraham,. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham knew that Isaac was the son through whom all God's promises would be fulfilled. How could God possibly demand that he sacrifice this son? But God's command was clear and Abraham determined to obey--without question or argument. And he did. However, just before Abraham raised his arm to slay his son who was already on the altar, God called to him and told him not to harm his son. Instead, God provided a ram as a substitute to be sacrificed in the place of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-14).

Immediately after Abraham's exceptional act of faith and obedience, God said to him, "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as sand on the seashore. . . . and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Genesis 22: 16-18). Abraham's willingness to offer his beloved son was clearly an act of obedience. But even more than that, it was an act of absolute *faith* in God. As Hebrews 11:19 puts it, "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

Abraham's action and God's provision of a ram as a substitute clearly pointed ahead to the gracious sacrifice of God's own beloved Son many centuries later. When Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, it was in the same geographical area where Abraham "offered" his own beloved son so long before. Abraham did not realize that, of course, but God did. God again provided a sign of **grace** which we today can only marvel at.

When Isaac grew up and married Rebekah, they discovered that she, like Sarah before her, was not able to have children. However, in answer to Isaac's prayer (Genesis 25:21), God **graciously** give them twin boys named Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn and therefore would normally receive the special blessing and favor which the firstborn son received in those days. However, God, in his wisdom and grace, chose to carry out His covenant promise through Jacob rather than through Esau (Genesis 25:23. See also Malachi 1:2-3.) God did not choose Jacob over Esau because Jacob would live an exemplary life of obedience. Jacob actually was a man of many weaknesses and failures. However, he also turned out to be a man of great faith. But it was again God's **grace** that preceded Jacob's faith and obedience. Some time after the birth of Esau and Jacob, there was a famine in the land of Canaan. God told Isaac not to leave the land but to stay in Canaan and trust Him to receive what he needed. God then renewed the promise He had made earlier to Abraham and said to Isaac, "Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. . . I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands; and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws" (Genesis 26:4-5).

Abraham's obedience and faithfulness were clearly very important in the sight of God. However, God's initial promises to him were not based on the things Abraham had done but purely on His **grace**.

Abraham was even disobedient at times, but in His grace, God never went back on His promise. Nor did God go back on His promise to Isaac (Genesis 26:24), even though Isaac's faith temporarily failed almost immediately after God gave him the promise! (See Genesis 26:7-11.)

### **ISAAC and HIS SON JACOB**

When Isaac was old and nearly blind, Jacob deceived his father and managed to get for himself the parental blessing which normally would have gone to his twin brother Esau. As a result of his deceit, Jacob had to flee from the land of promise (Canaan) and run to his relatives in another country. While he was on his journey, God sent Jacob a dream in which he saw angels going up and down a ladder from earth to heaven. Though Jacob had been dishonest and was running away from the land God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants, God graciously repeated to Jacob the promise He had given to Abraham long before, "I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:13-15).

God obviously did not give Jacob this special blessing because of his obedience or holiness. Both before and after this event, Jacob was known as someone who would do whatever he thought was necessary in order to get what he wanted. Why, then, did God bless Jacob so richly? Because of His **grace** and promise! If God would have dealt with Jacob simply on the basis of his "works," Jacob would never have received the blessings he did.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

After the building of the Tower of Babel, God "narrowed" the working out of His plan of redemption to just one man and his descendants. These people, known as the people of Israel, would be the focus of almost all of God's redemptive activity for many years. However, God's intention and purpose was to use these chosen people to be the ones who would serve as examples to all other peoples AND to bring into the world the "seed of the woman" promised in Genesis 3:15. Through this promised child God would **graciously** bring redemption to the all the nations of the world. And, after the coming of Jesus, the promised Savior, God's "chosen people" would be those who put their faith and trust in Him for salvation. Salvation was and always will be by the **grace** of God, received by **faith**, and lived out in obedience.

**In the next Lesson we will study the relationship between the giving of God's promises and the giving of His laws 400 years later.**

### **QUESTIONS FOR LESSON TWO**

1. God established His Covenant of Grace with a man called Abram (Abraham). Where was Abraham living when God first called him?
2. Why did God choose Abraham for this honor? Choose A or B or C.
  - A. God chose him because of His sovereign grace.

B. Abraham came from a family of people who loved and served the true God.

C. Abraham was a person known for his wisdom and integrity.

3. List four great promises God gave to Abraham (as recorded in Genesis 12:1-3).

A.

B.

C.

D.

4. What was God's ultimate purpose in calling Abraham and working through him?

5. How did Abraham respond when God called him to leave his homeland and go to a new land about which he knew little or nothing?

6. How does the apostle Paul describe Abraham in Romans 4:11 and 16?

7. God promised Abraham that He would bless those who blessed him (Abraham) and curse those who cursed him. Why did God do this? Choose A or B or C.

A. God chose Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations on earth. Those who encouraged Abraham would further God's purpose and those who opposed Abraham would interfere with God's purpose.

B. God didn't want anyone to interfere with the happiness and prosperity which Abraham earned by being a humble, faithful, and obedient servant of God.

C. Abraham was personally not yet firmly anchored in his faith, so God made sure that others would encourage Abraham as he gradually increased in faith and obedience.

8. List two ways in which the people of Israel were called to be a blessing to the other nations of the world. (See the Lesson notes.)

A.

B.

9. Were these two purposes (from question 8 above) fulfilled? Please explain your answer.

10.

A. What promise of God is recorded in Genesis 13:14-16?

B. Why was this promise so significant?

C. How did Abraham respond when God gave him this promise?

11.

- A. What additional promise did God give to Abraham in Genesis 15:4-5?
  - B. How did Abraham respond to this new promise?
  - C. How did God respond to Abraham's faith? (Genesis 15:6)
12. What does Romans 4:18-21 tell us about the faith of Abraham?
13. Why was Abram's name changed to Abraham? See Genesis 17:1-6.
- 14.
- A. What promise did God give to Abraham in Genesis 17:6?
  - B. What promise did God give to Abraham in Genesis 17:7?
  - C. What promise did God give to Abraham in Genesis 17:8?
15. God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham and his descendants was first recorded in Genesis 12:3. List three other places (outside of Genesis) where this promise was repeated in the Bible.
- A.
  - B.
  - C.
- 16.
- A. What was the sign of the Covenant of Grace which God made with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:11-13).
  - B. How important was this sign in the sight of God? (See Genesis 17:14)
  - C. How important was this sign to the
- Israelites? 17.
- A. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as an offering to him, how did he respond?
  - B. When God spared Isaac's life, what "substitute" did God provide?
  - C. In what ways does this story of Abraham and Isaac point forward to the coming of Christ? (See Genesis 22:2, John 1:29, John 3:16.)
- 18.
- A. When Abraham's son Isaac and his wife Rebekah were not able to have children, what did Isaac do?
  - B. When Rebekah later gave birth to twin sons, which one of them was chosen by God to



continue the "covenant line"?

C. Why was God's choice so significant?

19. Jacob (also called Israel) had to run away from his home in Canaan because he had deceived his father and cheated his brother. When God appeared to him in a dream while he was running away, what did God promise him? (Genesis 28:13-15)
20. Did Jacob deserve to receive this promise? Please give the reason for your answer.

### **FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

1. Out of all the stories and events listed in this Lesson, select two which, in your mind, best illustrate that salvation is by grace alone. Then explain why you have chosen these particular stories rather than others.
2. According to the Lesson notes, what was the significance of choosing circumcision as a sign of the Covenant of Grace? Can you think of any other reasons why God might have chosen this particular sign?
3. In the New Testament Abraham is called "The father of believers." Do you think this is an appropriate title for Abraham? Please give the reason for your answer.
4. Give some examples from Genesis which demonstrate that "God's grace precedes His commands.
5. In the book of Genesis God often showed kindness, grace, and love to people who failed to trust or obey Him consistently. Do you think God still does that today? Can you give some examples from your own life?

### **Grace Lesson Two Answers**

1. In Ur of the Chaldeans in present day Iraq.
2. A
3.
  - A. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and to bless him.
  - B. God promised to make Abraham's name great and make him a blessing.
  - C. God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and to curse those who cursed him.
  - D. God promised that all people on earth would be blessed through Abraham.
4. God's ultimate promise to Abraham was that He would bless the entire world through Abraham and

his descendants by providing a Savior for all who would believe in him.

5. Abraham immediately obeyed God, left his homeland and followed God's leading.

6. Paul refers to Abraham as "the father of all believers."

**7. A**

8.

A. God would provide a Savior in Abraham's family line for all who believed in Him.

B. The People of Israel were called to live lives of faith and holiness as examples to the rest of the world. In doing this they would demonstrate to the rest of the world what it meant to live as the children of the one true God.

9. The first purpose was fulfilled through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing could stand in the way of the fulfillment of this divine and eternal purpose. However, the second purpose was not always fulfilled. When the people of Israel were obedient and faithful, they did serve as an example and as a testimony to the other nations. However, they were frequently disobedient and unfaithful and no longer served as an example or a testimony to others.

10.

A. God promised that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth.

B. This promise was especially significant because when the promise was given Abraham and Sarah still no children and Sarah was apparently unable to have children.

C. Abraham believed what God had promised even though it seemed impossible that the promise could be filled.

11.

A. When it appeared to Abraham that he and Sarah would not have a son of their own, they thought that God would probably provide an heir through Abraham's male servant. However, God promised Abraham that he would have a son of his own and that his offspring would eventually be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

B. Abraham again believed without question or hesitation what God had promised.

C. God credited his faith to him as righteousness.

12. Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why it was credited to him as righteousness."

13. Abram means "exalted father" while Abraham means "father of many." Since God promised

Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, the name change was appropriate.

14.

- A. The Lord told Abraham that he would become very fruitful, that He would make nations of him, and that kings would come from him.
- B. God promised that He would establish His covenant with Abraham and his descendants as an everlasting covenant and that He would be Abraham's God and the God of his descendants after him.
- C. God promised that He would give the whole land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants after him.

15.

- A. Psalm 72:17
- B. Acts 3:25
- C. Galatians 3:8-9

16.

- A. Circumcision of all males
- B. This sign was so important that the males who refused to be circumcised were cut off from the people of Israel because they had broken the covenant.
- C. The people of Israel always regarded circumcision as the distinguishing mark of the chosen people and looked down upon those who were not circumcised.

17.

- A. Once again, Abraham responded positively without complaint or argument, even though he could not understand why God was asking him to do this.
- B. God provided a ram which was sacrificed in place of Isaac.
- C. The sacrificial ram was a type of Christ who, many years later, would be sacrificed as a substitute for all believers. It is also significant that the place where Jesus was crucified was most likely in the same geographical area where the substitute ram was sacrificed.

18.

- A. Isaac prayed that Rebekah would be able to have a child.
- B. Jacob (later called Israel) who was the younger of the two sons.
- C. Normally, the older son would be chosen to receive a special blessing as the firstborn

son in the family. God's choice of Jacob rather than his older brother showed that God's covenant blessing was a matter of grace and not a matter of tradition or human choice.

19. God said to runaway Jacob, "I will give and your descendants the land on which you are lying. . . All people on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. . . . I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."
20. Jacob had done NOTHING to deserve this promise. In fact, Jacob was running away from his home and parents because his older brother was determined to kill Jacob because he had lied to their father, deceiving him when he was old and blind, in order that he might "steal" his brother's birthright blessing.

### **FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

1. Students will likely choose a variety of stories here. The reasons given for their choices should be interesting and informative.
2. The Lesson notes point out three reasons why circumcision was a significant choice as the sign of the Covenant of Grace. Students should list these reasons and may have some additional thoughts of their own.
  - A. The covenant sign would be intimately involved in the creation of the children God promised to bless.
  - B. Circumcision was a sign of the removal of defilement or impurity.
  - C. Circumcision involved the shedding of blood.
3. Yes. The title is appropriate first of all because this is the title given to Abraham in the Bible itself. Abraham exhibited complete faith in God whenever God gave Him a promise or a command. He did not disbelieve any of His promises or disobey any of His commands. Besides, Abraham was the one with whom God established the Covenant of Grace which includes believers of both the Old and New Testaments.
4. Students will likely list some obvious examples and may also include some examples which are missed by others.
5. Yes. He obviously does. None of us trusts or obeys God perfectly or even as consistently as we should. All of us could give examples of that from our own lives. Students should have little difficulty in finding personal illustrations of that.

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