

GENESIS 12-17

(ABRAHAM 1-2)

Introduction

This portion of the “Witnessing Christ from the Old Testament” study covers Genesis chapters 12-17. LDS “Come Follow Me” studies will include Abraham chapters 1-2 from [The Pearl of Great Price](#). As happens most weeks, when there are “parallel” accounts, most of the emphasis for LDS study is placed on the readings from the Book of Abraham rather than on the biblical account of Abraham in Genesis.

[You can find the LDS outline of study and resources here.](#)

What is The Book of Abraham?

According to the LDS church, [The Book of Abraham](#) is:

A translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus. (*Pearl of Great Price* Introduction)

The Book of Abraham presents Abraham as a man who desired to do what was righteous. Abraham is an almost otherworldly hero. As Abraham noticed the sin and sinners around him, he decided to relocate “to keep the commandments” and “take on the ordinances of the High Priesthood.” God, in turn, responded to Abraham’s “righteousness” by blessing him and allowing him to bless others.

The Book of Abraham repeatedly contrasts Abraham with the Egyptians to show that he was a more righteous man. This portrayal of Abraham stands in stark contrast to the Genesis account of his interactions with the Egyptians, who often appeared to be *better* in many ways than him.

LDS Study Focus

The LDS study guide focuses on the theme: “To Be a Greater Follower of Righteousness.” Readers are encouraged to ponder how Abraham and Sarah’s examples inspire them and record impressions about what one can do to be a greater follower of righteousness.

Biblical Focus

In the Bible, Abraham and Sarah are portrayed as deeply flawed, sinful people who are unconditionally loved by a God who desires to rescue his people. God’s perfection and consistency contrast Abraham and Sarah’s sin and doubt.

GENESIS 12

God takes the initiative and calls Abram. He commands him to leave his family and his home to go to a land that would one day belong to his descendants. We see the creation of faith in Abram's heart as he obeys, leaving his home and worshiping God in a foreign land. The calling of Abram is not just to begin a new nation, but it is ultimately about the Messiah through whom all nations would be blessed.

Following the account of Abram's calling, we meet Abram, the sinner. The depth of Abram's sin is appalling. He lacked trust in God, lied, put himself before his wife, caused his wife to commit adultery, and profited greatly from all of it. Later in Genesis 20:1-18, Abram commits the same sin *again*! Yet, God did not renege on his covenant with Abram. Instead, he rescued Sarai, their marriage, and the promise.

We would never use this portion of scripture to condone sin. Instead, these vast moral failings of this hero of faith cause us to marvel at the never-ceasing mercy of God. It teaches us that righteousness is not about our own steadfastness or even the strength of our faith. Rather it is about in *whom* that faith is placed.

Conversation starters:

- **Have you ever noticed what God required of Abram when he was called in Genesis 12?**
- **When I first learned about Abram, I did not know about the big sins he committed. What surprised you the most when you read about him in Genesis?**
- **Genesis 12 gives such a striking contrast between the call and the character of Abram. Considering his flawed character, why do you think God chose Abram?**
- **What do you think gave Abram the courage to obey? To leave his home, land, and people to go on this journey God had in store for him?**
- **Who comes off looking more "righteous" in Genesis 12? Abram or the Egyptians?**

Sharing personally:

"When I read Genesis 12 and see how Abram treated his wife Sarai, right after God promised to bless him, I am appalled by his selfishness and his willingness to put his wife in danger.

However, like Abram, I have failed to trust God and have lied to protect myself. As a result, my sinful selfishness has endangered my friends and family and has led others to sin.

When I see how God dealt with Abram, I marvel that he forgives and keeps his promises to such sinners. I then am freer to be honest about the depth of my sinfulness before God.

Additionally, I am comforted by the reminder that my righteousness before God has nothing to do with my personal victories over sin but everything to do with Christ's victory over sin for me."

Additional resources: For a deeper dive into the difference between LDS and biblical covenants, see ["Witnessing Christ from the Liahona: On the Covenant Path"](#) under the "Witness to Mormons" blog category on TILM.org

GENESIS 13 & 14

Abram's and Lot's estates had grown so large that they could no longer share the land. Abram realized that it was time to separate. Many commentators focus on the generosity of Abram as he gives Lot the first choice of the land. However, Abram allowed his nephew to choose the land that proved to be both physically and spiritually dangerous. Therefore, highlighting Abram's generosity as a virtue is not advised. It's so easy to take the focus off of God and make this story all about Abram.

As Abram and Lot outgrew the area where they had settled, we remember that the land was promised to Abram and not yet owned by him. Heathen cities and nations still occupied Canaan.

As Lot chooses to live close to dangerous Sodom, we can relate to the natural consequences that ensued. The world we live in is filled with danger and turmoil caused by the sin around us. Sometimes we can see it for what it is and avoid it. Sometimes we cannot. This sin broken world can be like a drainpipe swirling and circling us closer and closer to death.

Abram is a Christ-like figure in this portion of the narrative. He plans and carries out his attack against Lot's captors, seemingly without fear. Not only does he rescue Lot, but he recovers his people and possessions.

At the end of chapter 14, Abram had a strange interaction with Melchizedek, the king of Salem. This obscure figure is referenced again in Hebrews 7. Members of the LDS church are much more familiar with Melchizedek than Christians are because of their emphasis on the Melchizedek Priesthood, which faithful male members aspire to hold.

Conversation starters:

- **Do you ever wonder if we, like Lot, foolishly live too close to the dangers of sin? What consequences do we face?**
- **How does Christ rescue us from this dangerous world and from death?**
- **Do you see how Abram was a Christ-like figure for Lot? Have you noticed other "Christ-like" figures in the Old Testament? Which ones? Some stories point ahead to the coming rescue of the Messiah.**

Sharing personally:

"Like Lot, in Genesis 13, I have spent my time too close to those who lead me into sin. I have looked at the things of this world and given in to their desires and false promises of protection. As a result, I have made a real mess of things for myself and my family.

I'm so glad that I have a God who loves me enough to rescue me from my foolishness. In my life, he used a rescuer even better than Abram. Jesus came to save me from the desires of my heart and the destruction of my decisions. He defeated my enemies of sin, death, and Satan and has given me the spoils of war; the forgiveness of sins and life forever with God."

Additional resources:

You can learn more about the LDS concept of the Melchizedek Priesthood in the article ["Priesthood Matters"](#) on TILM.org.

GENESIS 15

It had been ten years since God first called Abram, instructing him to move to the land promised to his descendants. Although Abram's wealth and power have increased during this time, he is still childless, and therefore God's promise remained unfulfilled.

In Genesis 15, God again gives Abram an incredible guarantee. His children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Verse 6 is a key verse. There was only one thing that made Abram right with God. It was not his obedience or unwavering trust—instead, it was his belief in God that gave him access to the righteousness of Christ.

“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” ([Genesis 15:6](#))

Righteousness

According to LDS teaching, righteousness is “being just, holy, virtuous, upright; acting in obedience to God’s commands; avoiding sin.” The terms “righteous” and “righteousness” also apply to mortals who seek to come unto Christ, though beset with weaknesses and frailties. In this sense, righteousness is not synonymous with perfection. Instead, it is a condition in which a person is moving toward the Lord, yearning for godliness, continuously repenting of sins, and striving honestly to know and love God and follow the gospel’s principles and ordinances.

Biblical Christianity teaches that righteousness is right standing with God. It requires perfect obedience to God’s commands. It is often used synonymously with holiness since holy character results in a righteous position ([Acts 3:14](#)). However, since no one can perfectly keep the commandments, it is impossible to be made righteous by the law ([Romans 3:10,20](#)). Only Jesus can be called “righteous” ([1 John 2:1](#)) because he lived perfectly for us under the law ([Galatians 4:4](#)). He gives us his perfect record ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#), [Romans 5:17](#)) through faith ([Romans 3:22](#)).

Covenant

Next, God initiates a covenant ceremony with Abram but refuses to let Abram participate. “Cutting a covenant” was an ancient practice where the two parties cut animals in half, separated them into rows, and walked between severed carcasses. The symbolism implied, “May this happen to me if I break my part of the covenant.” Here, God was the only one who walked through the covenant path. God was the only one who made a promise. Nothing was required of Abram.

Covenants are a central theme in Mormonism, yet the focus is always bilateral and conditional on a person’s obedience. If Mormons promise to do their part, obey, then God will do his part, bless.

A covenant is a sacred agreement between God and a person or group of people. God sets specific conditions, and He promises to bless us as we obey those conditions. When we choose not to keep covenants, we cannot receive the blessings, and in some instances, we suffer a penalty as a consequence of our disobedience. (True to the Faith, p. 44)

Almost everything in Mormonism is considered a covenant. For example, “Each ordinance and requirement to man for the purpose of bringing to pass his salvation and exaltation is a covenant” (*Achieving a Celestial Marriage Student Manual*, p. 197).

While some Biblical covenants are bilateral, the essential covenant, the new covenant, is unilateral ([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)). God does all the work. No conditions are attached.

Conversation Starters:

- **Have you ever noticed the reason Abram was counted as righteous in Genesis?**
- **According to the story of Abraham, what makes one righteous before God?**
- **Why do you think God made this covenant with Abram one-sided?**
- **How does God's relationship with Abram and his covenant with him help us better understand God's relationship with us now?**

Sharing personally:

"When reading Abram's story in Genesis 15, it gets me thinking a lot about making and keeping covenants. I am thankful that God's covenant with me is about the promises *he* has made and kept. I know my own heart, and I know that even if I desire to do something wholeheartedly, there are many promises that I have made and have broken.

If I could only receive blessings from God based on keeping promises to him, then I am afraid I would be left empty. However, God's blessings in my life are not based on my making and keeping promises but on the fact that he had made and kept his promises to me.

In Christ Jesus, my Savior, I can be sure about my eternity. On the cross, as Jesus' hands, feet, and side were pierced for my sins, God cut a covenant of love and faithfulness with me. Because of the blood of Jesus, I know that all of God's promises are kept perfectly."

or

"The story of Abram, in Genesis 15, helps me to stop being afraid of my lack of righteousness. God gifted Abram righteousness. And, if it was a gift from God, it is complete, and it is perfect.

This kind of righteousness comes from outside of myself. It is not something I can produce. Since I am a sinner, Christ had to obtain this righteousness for me. It is through trust in Christ that his righteousness becomes my righteousness."

Additional resources:

For a deeper dive into Biblical covenants, please see ["A Humanitarian by Making a Wonderful Covenant,"](#) chapter 4 of the book and study of *God—The Ultimate Humanitarian* available on [BeYePerfect.org](#).

GENESIS 16 & 17

In Genesis chapters 16 and 17, right after God gave promises and pictures of what he would do for them, Abram and Sarai foolishly act out of doubt and fear. It had been ten years since God first made his promise to them, and Sarai still had not conceived. Finally, to grasp control and *help* God, Sarai suggests that Abram take Hagar as a wife. Abram agrees, and Ishmael is born. After his birth, Abram allows Sarai to mistreat Hagar so much that she runs away.

It is disturbing to watch Abram, God's chosen patriarch of the faith, display such horrible acts of cruelty and doubt in God's power. What would happen today to any leader of the church acting similarly?

This section highlights that Abram was both a sinner and a saint simultaneously. His failings are recorded for us so that we can believe that God loves the worst of sinners.

After attempting to control the outcome, God comes to Abram again and renews his promise. This time he attaches two more physical reminders. First, he changes Abram's name to Abraham, which means "Exalted Father of Many Nations." Second, he establishes the covenant of circumcision, a physical reminder that from his seed would come the fulfillment of the promises of God.

Conversation starters:

- **Why do you think God waited so long to fulfill his promise of a son to Abram?**
- **What did Abram and Sarai discover about God as they waited?**
- **What does Abram's sin problem teach us about ourselves and our God?**
- **Why did God give Abram and Sarai new names?**

Sharing personally:

"It is embarrassing for me to admit all the ways that doubt has affected my actions. I wish that I had always trusted in God, but fear has won many battles in my life. I can relate to all those biblical characters who were given so much reason to trust God but instead trusted in their ridiculous plots.

When I read in Genesis 16 and 17 about Abram and Sarai's plan to carry out God's promises, I had difficulty believing God would continue to love them. Their actions are deplorable, and they deserve rejection. But God never leaves them! He even gives them new names to reassure them of his love and faithfulness.

God's forgiveness and commitment are so unfathomable it truly takes a miracle for me to believe they are true. But, because he is always true, my status before God is sure. Not because of what I have done. But because of who he is and who has declared me to be.

Thank you, God, for being committed to sinners like us! Thank you for renaming us "saints," "children of God," and "heir of eternal life."

Additional resources: For a deeper dive into **our status as forgiven children of God**, please see "[A Humanitarian by Giving Us a Wonderful Status,](#)" chapter 12 of the book and study of *God—The Ultimate Humanitarian* available on BeYePerfect.org.

We want to hear from you:

What questions and comments for witnessing do you have about Genesis 12-17 or the topic of COVENANTS? We would love to hear from you. Please email us or share in the comments section below.

Are you formerly LDS? We would love to read your insights into how you **would have** understood these chapters and what you have come to appreciate or see differently about them now. Please email us or share in the comments section below.