

**Youth Group Devotionals**  
**Week 5**  
**Genesis 15-18**

## PINKY SWEAR

What do you do to make an agreement with someone? Have you ever spit in your hand while your friend did the same and shake on something? Yeah, I haven't either and frankly it sounds really gross. However, people do all kinds of things to make a promise together. What happened to the days of the good ole pinky swear? We will read a passage where God made an agreement with Abraham. It has rich meaning that gives us so much hope and encouragement.

### Read Genesis 15

When you read this passage, you have to remember that Abraham just rescued Lot in a daring military action. God blessed him and he was victorious. Abraham has just experienced victory in all ways but here we see that God comes around Abraham and continues to encourage him. Abraham is surrounded by the realization that God is his shield and great reward. This is important because we need to know that the evil one will try to discourage us and tempt us to move away from a place that is close to God, a place where we have had victory through Him.

So be reminded that God comes along side you and says that He is our shield and our great reward. God also does something amazing in this passage. He makes a covenant (a promise) which is really powerful because when God makes a promise, He keeps His promises. How do they come to this covenant. Jeremiah 34:18 speaks of a 'covenant' or contract that certain men made with God. When they made this covenant, they cut a calf in two and then walked between the pieces. God says that since they broke their part of the covenant he will *'treat them like the calf they cut in two'*.

Even if you don't have any background it is possible to determine from the text in Jeremiah that there is something going on with ancient contracts of the day with the making ceremonies. In today's society, it would be done through your signature and writing contracts. Unless you have it signed and legally documented, it may not be considered valid. But ancient cultures were oral cultures and story-telling cultures. And the way contracts were often ratified (parallel to our 'signing' or 'handshake') was when the parties dramatically acted out the penalty for breaking the covenant. A way that covenants were made was to kill an animal, cut it into pieces, and walk between it as the oath was taken. This way the speaker was identifying with the animal and expressing his willingness to receive the 'curse of the covenant' if he is not faithful to his promise.

As you read in Genesis 15:17, we are given very graphic imagery of a smoking firepot with a blazing torch. This can be seen as God's presence showing Himself in great power. After this demonstration, we see that God himself taking a covenantal oath (promise) and entering into a contractual, binding relationship with Abraham. I was reading some material by Tim Keller and he suggests that there are two amazing things about this covenant making ritual.

First of all, it is incredible that God goes through the pieces himself. In the ancient Near East, when a lesser party made a treaty with a great King, it was often customary that only the party took the oath and walked between the pieces. But here God lowers himself to take the oath and made himself accountable.

Second, it is even more amazing that Abram is not asked to go through the animal pieces or take an oath. If Abram were to also walk through the pieces here and now, then the promised covenant blessing would be as contingent on Abram's keeping his promise as on God's keeping his. But here it is all God. What an amazing thing God does for us. He continues to show us His mercy, grace and love. It should blow us away that the mighty Creator loves us and takes initiative with us. Take some time just in reflection of this fact.

## My Way or Yahweh?

Now probably the first thing that strikes you is the title. Yes, I know it's been there before and ironically, it's written by the same dude again. But if you've never seen this title, then read these devos more! Haha jk. But not really. But hey, this title is very fitting for what we are going to dig into these next however-many-minutes you spend reading and reflecting. So let's get to it!

### Read Genesis 16.

Ah, the famous "oops" passage – at least it is for me. So here we have Abram and Sarai, the couple that has been promised by God (Yahweh) to be the ancestors to multitudes of descendants from numerous nations. God clearly promised Abram back at 15:4 that "a son coming from your own body will be your heir." But apparently that son never came yet...or at least Sarai thought that he never would. So what does she do? At verse 2, she says to Abram to "sleep with my maidservant" and, as a result, an heir would be born. So Abram and Hagar do their thing, and Hagar gets pregnant. Consequently, Hagar is filled with pride – she's carrying *the* heir, why wouldn't she be? – and she starts to lose respect for her mistress, barren Sarai. And you probably know what happens for the rest of the passage. Hagar runs away, meets an angel, is promised to have a son named Ishmael, and then praises God for his omniscient compassion towards her.

Now I was thinking, how does this passage ever relate to me? I'm a guy. Well as simple as I can make it, let me ask you a question. Did Sarai handle her "barrenness" **her** way or **God's** way (Yahweh, get it?) That's a rhetorical question of course. Genesis 16 speaks of humanity's lack of faith in God, and how that same lack of faith leads us to do things our own way. Sarai waited long enough for the true heir. She was impatient. Well gosh, she was old! If you were a woman in the mid-80's and God said to you that you'll have a glorious son, even when you have never had children before, would you believe it?

Let me rephrase the question. If God said to you one day, that you were going to be CEO of a multibillion dollar business or that you were going to be the doctor that finds the cure for cancer, would you trust His word? See here, these questions are a test of your faith in God Almighty. As Christians, we say, "YEAH Jesus is awesome and I totally believe in Him!" But do we **truly** believe in Him? Do we **truly** have faith in Him? I once wrote an essay for my English class last year on what the term *faith* meant to me personally. I stated that faith, unlike belief, causes action. Belief is simply trust, but faith speaks louder than words – it calls us to test our belief, and for us as Christians, belief in the intangible and invisible.

Are you living your life, knowing that each step you take is made possible through your Creator? Do you have that faith? Or will you throw the white flag and do things your own way? God calls each one of us to be so much more than who we are. All we have to do is have faith, and go all out. Let me end with a corny question (again). **Is it your way or Yahweh?** Pray to our eternal Friend and Father (capital f's) and evaluate where you are on your faith-walk with Him.

## The God of Circumcision

Read: Genesis 17

If you have time, read also Acts 15 and Romans 2: 17-29

In this chapter God begins to lay down one of the important concepts of the entire Bible: covenant. A covenant is a *specific* promise between two sides. In this case, the covenant is between God and Abram, as well as his descendants. And the physical symbol of that covenant is circumcision (for guys). But even moreso, Abram and Sarai have new names. Abram (exalted father) is now Abraham (father of many). And Sarai is now Sarah. And God continued: "I will bless her and surely give you a son by her" (vs. 16). Isaac will be the one who holds the covenant with God, not Ishmael. Thus, all of Abram's family members and Isaac's descendants must be circumcised as a physical mark of their covenantal agreement with God.

The concept - not the act - of circumcision is important especially for Christians, especially for us with our new youth group theme: "Seeking Wholeness: Being Good News to the Lost." It is so important that, in fact, the first church council, the Jerusalem Council, was convened over this specific issue. In Acts 15, some former Pharisees who converted to Christianity argued that circumcision is still necessary, even for Gentile converts. Peter, generally regarded as the titular leader of the apostles, notes (vs. 8) that the Holy Spirit made no distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. All Christ's followers received the Holy Spirit regardless of whether they were former Jews or Gentiles. The Council has made their decision - Gentile converts do not need to be circumcised to be Christian. They wrote a letter - an apostolic letter - and circulated it to the churches. St. Paul was one of the messengers.

Maybe for that reason, Paul had time to think over the issue more clearly. In Romans 2, Paul notes that circumcision is useless if you break the law! What's the use of having a physical mark of your allegiance to God if you break his laws all the time? Indeed, a Gentile who obeys the law is so much more preferable to a Jewish man who keeps breaking it! And, in verse 29, Paul nails the issue down - the circumcision that God wants is a "circumcision of the heart." It is a heart who is allied to God.

Are our hearts circumcised? Do we live one way at church, but live completely oppositely at school? Remember the youth group theme? This wholeness *is* circumcision. And when we are circumcised in our hearts, we will be changed people. That's why our theme makes so much sense: "Being Good News to the Lost." Lost people don't look for other lost people to find their way - they look for people who have the light. Do we have this light in our hearts?

Spend time reflecting over this. Are your hearts circumcised? Are they set apart for the Lord?

## Well, I've Got Some Good News and Some Bad News . . .

### Read Genesis 18:1-21

Ever notice how God comes to your side in encouraging you as you take a large step forward in faith? God is the kind of God that encourages us as we pursue a deeper relationship with him. This whole bit starts off with God visiting Abraham to encourage him and give him news as he is recovering from covenant circumcision, which is a huge step for him at the age of 99. Some of the news is great and long awaited, and some is terrible news that involves Abraham's loved ones; and though this is only a momentary glimpse into Abraham's life we get to see how a man of God accepts and responds to both kinds of news.

Observe how Abraham's first reaction is generous hospitality. Without, I think, even fully grasping who the three visitors are at first he invites them to stay, serves them up a feast, and -like a hospitable middle-easterner for his day- stands by and waits on them even though it's the heat of the day. Now having been on the giving and receiving end of Asian hospitality on a number of occasions I'd definitely say Asian hospitality is on a level above western concepts of hospitality for sure; but when comparing it to Abraham's hospitality towards those who are so obviously strangers to him, I'd have to say he definitely one-upped us. This should give us pause; how are we treating strangers? The writer of Hebrews was recalling this when he wrote: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Hebrews 13:2

And now for the good news . . . Sarah's going to have a baby . . . at the age of 90. Sure Sarah expresses a little bitterness at first hearing the news, but maybe that's just her hormones kicking back on. No, seriously though, Sarah has had to wait a long time for this. God promised her she was going to have a baby over ten years before, and at that time she was already post-menopausal; and all this with people looking on her with judgment for years because she can't have a kid. Sometimes I think that we need to put this in a little perspective for our own lives. Sometimes God does give us a word or promise for our own futures that can be years in coming. How will we react when he finally works them out? Sarah was a little bitter, not the best way to react, but she kept faith that God could do what he says and she was later commended for that faith. How are we keeping faithful to the work that God is doing long-term in our own lives?

Wait! There's still the bad news! The Bible for a moment shows us this dialogue God has about what to say to Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah. You may recall that Abraham personally knows people in these cities other than his nephew Lot when he went to rescue his nephew and return the goods of the people of those cities previously. What I notice though, is how God speaks of Abraham and his descendants as a blessing to the earth, of how they will follow and keep his ways doing what is just and right and bringing forth God's promises right before he speaks to Abraham about the evil legacy of both of these nations. God knows from the outcry against them what they are both doing, God even knew before people started crying out against these nations, and yet he goes down to have a personal look. Why? God confronts us in our sin. There is a significant difference from Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah and yet God pays a visit to both. Yet one receives a promise of redemption- Abraham in walking in faith with God- and the other foreshadowed judgment. Likewise for the believer, there is a difference in how we live and how we respond to God, and it should be a blessing to everyone with whom we come in contact.

*Pray for a generous spirit in showing hospitality to others, and pray for discernment for how you can walk faithfully and be a blessing to others by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## Abraham's persistence and God's character

### Read Genesis 18:22-33

I think that after reading this passage, a lot of people may be confused by the fact that God seems to change His mind about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or that humans (Abraham) seem to be able to negotiate with God. I think that both of these are also pitfalls on our journey to see the true point of this story. To be perfectly honest, I am also not going to address it because I do not feel capable of doing so. I need to look more into God's Word and ask my elders in the faith (Ben, Jon, Jenn, Henry, Norregaards, my parents, etc) what these things truly mean. But two things that I DO want to emphasize—Abraham's persistence and God's character—because I believe that these two things are the biggest things that we can draw from this short passage.

But a tangent before we start: I just want to point out that "Abraham still stood before the LORD" as he talked to God. When I really think about that scene, it sounds ridiculously intimate. I mean, a dude standing before the LORD...holy smokes, now there's a thought. While we could go into a great theological debate about whether Abraham was physically standing before the LORD or not, I think the main point is the intimacy that was present between Him and God—so much so that Abraham was having what seems to be a spoken conversation with God. Just something that we can all strive towards: a deeper intimacy with God.

But going off of that point (so it wasn't that much of a tangent, really), I think that Abraham's persistence in appealing to the LORD is commendable and admirable. Initially, Abraham appeals to God's justice, asking if God will still destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if there are 50 righteous people in the city. Yet, his worry for and heart for those who may die unnecessarily (namely, Lot) caused him to continually appeal to God; and eventually, Abraham reduces the number of righteous to 10 to avert the destruction of the city. I think that this persistence is extraordinary and that we should all learn this sort of persistence in our conversations (prayer) with God. Yet, I think it's also important to note that Abraham's persistence all came out of humility—he knew that he was unworthy of even speaking to God, let alone appealing to Him in such a fashion. He repeatedly asks God not to be angry and reaffirms his complete dependence on God. That is, I believe, another attitude that we can learn from Abraham: one of humility and complete submission.

Secondly, I think it's super awesome that God, with all of His power (He could do anything He wanted), is JUST. He is the only completely just king there was, is, and ever will be. And I think it's super sweet just thinking about that: God will never punish anyone for something they didn't do. We will never be accused falsely. Just a thought. Marinate on that a little: God is just.

Now to bring it all together...Abraham sets a tremendous example of prayer for us in this passage. So how can you learn from his example of humility and persistence in prayer? What tangible things can you do today that reflect that humility and persistence in your prayer life? And God's response to his humble and persistent prayer is just, right, and all out of compassion for his created beings. So if we pray God's will, what do we have to fear? If we do so, there is no way that God will not be just to listen and come through mightily, showing his power in glorious ways. So what are you waiting for? My prayer is that you may look at Abraham's example of prayer and God's response to it, and come before His throne with confidence, knowing that the God of the universe has you and your problems in His hands.