

# FALL 2022 FACILITATOR GUIDE

## COVENANT

GOD'S PROMISES & FAITHFULNESS

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## COVENANT

### GOD'S PROMISES & FAITHFULNESS

This series, drawing from the story of the Old Testament, will show us how God's covenant with the people of Israel sets a foundation for the story of the Bible. His faithfulness to His promises sets a foundation for our trust in the Gospel. This fall, we'll learn about the old covenant, God's faithfulness, and the wonderful, good news that God makes a new covenant with us in Jesus Christ

## HOW TO USE THE FACILTATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help guide you through your group's Bible discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions together in an open conversation (remember to practice good listening and to encourage dialogue), and close with a time where you will pray for each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

There are typically more questions that your group will get through. This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at [dkidd@ualc.org](mailto:dkidd@ualc.org).  
For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit [ualc.org/smallgroups](http://ualc.org/smallgroups)

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# THE COVENANT STORY

JEREMIAH 31:17-34

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 1

In this discussion we will explore some of the nature of covenants, but at the heart of these covenants is the Lord's commitment to be with, rescue, and redeem his people—that they would flourish in the *shalom* God intended since his creation of the world. We will discuss how humanity continually failed to live up to their end of God's agreements with them, and yet, despite humanity's unfaithfulness, the Lord continued to be faithful. This culminating in the new and standing promise, the Gospel of Jesus, where the law is in our minds and hearts, the Lord is our God, and we are his people.

Jeremiah 30-33 have been called “the book of consolation”, or “the little book of comfort.” Chapter 30 begins with Yahweh instructing the prophet to “write in a scroll all the words I have spoken to you.” In the midst of a book filled with war, death, and lament, these three chapters suspend pivotal hope in the promises of the Lord's eventual redemption of God's people. In today's passage, we'll read about the waywardness of God's people (interchangeably called Ephraim, Israel, and the unfaithful daughter), and how the Lord's heart compassionately yearned for them, leading him to make a new kind of covenant.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we're beginning a series on God's covenants. Throughout this series we will discuss the Lord's promises to his people. These types of promises are called covenants. The Lord's faithfulness seen through these covenants serve as the foundation for us to believe in Christ's Gospel promises.

We generally see two kinds of covenants in Scripture; these model the types of promises kings would make in the ancient near East. First are conditional promises, where the ruling power (in this case, the Lord) promises blessings to a subject (God's people) as long as they remain faithful to the specifications of the king. Alternatively, there are covenant promises a ruling power makes (again, the Lord) to their subjects where they (the king) take on the all the consequences if ever they were to break their promise. As we read about these covenants in the weeks to come, you might note which promises are conditional and which are not.

That said, in today's passage from Jeremiah, we get a remarkable insight into how God views his relationship with his people, even when humans fail to live up to their end of the bargain. We will see together that the Lord is trustworthy even when we are not. But first, a warmup question.

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

- They say never meet your heroes. Have you ever met someone you'd consider a hero? How did it go? If not, how do you imagine it might go?
  - Share with us a time when you made an ill-advised decision that backfired on you.
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## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, thank you for being the God who makes good and trustworthy promises to us. We pray that you meet us in this passage and in our discussion. That you build our faith, that you bring us hope, and that you allow our hearts to rest in you. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Our passage comes from the book of Jeremiah, a collection of sermons and poems by the prophet Jeremiah who proclaimed warnings of God's imminent judgment over Jerusalem for their unfaithfulness to him, and their exploitation and injustice. This judgement would eventually come when the Babylonians captured Israel and scattered them into exile. The verses we will read are God's promise to his people, amidst their exile, that the Lord still has redemptive and good plans for them.

Have someone read Jeremiah 31:17-34. Thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

This passage begins with a word of redemptive hope from the Lord, "There is hope for your descendants, [...] your children will return to their own land." Imagine you were among the group of people who had heard Jeremiah warning of the Lord's coming judgement by the hands of the Babylonians. Now you are in exile and this same prophet is proclaiming that the Lord desires you to take hope in future.

- How do you imagine you would receive Jeremiah's prophecy? Do you think you would believe him? Would you find comfort in his prophecy?
  - Receive all answers. Consider with your group whether you think you would believe Jeremiah or perhaps count him as part of the conspiracy that led to your exile.
  - Does God's word about hearing the moans of his people and promising a hope for their (your) descendants bring peace or gratitude, or something else?

The Lord said through Jeremiah that he had heard Ephraim's (Israel's) confession and contrition, that they now appreciated God's discipline, and were ready to be restored and returned to God's kingship.

- What does this tell us about the reasons the Lord brought judgement on Israel?

- The Lord had warned Israel and particularly her kings (throughout Jeremiah) to turn from their injustice, greed, violence, exploitation, idolatry, and infidelities. God would not allow his people, who were meant to be his priestly nation to the world, to go on defiling his purposes and multiplying suffering. A severe act of discipline was necessary in order to convict them of their unrighteousness.
- Have you ever seen God discipline someone (or experienced God’s discipline) in order to draw them back to himself and his will?
  - Facilitators, you may want to encourage the group to not name individuals to avoid gossip. It’s also worth noting that the Bible has many instances where tragedy befalls faithful people, so we should be careful not to attribute bad circumstances as an indication of guilt.
  - Consider sharing a story about a time God used conviction or discipline to alert you to your waywardness and draw you back to himself.
- When speaking of his response to Ephraim (Israel), what images does the Lord use to describe his relationship with his people?
  - He describes Ephraim as his “dear son,” whom he delights in; as the Virgin Israel and the unfaithful wandering daughter; as a relationship where a woman returns or encompasses a man (grammatically ambiguous).
- How do these verses help us understand the nature of God’s covenants? How are these relationships like—and unlike—a conditional promise between a king and his subjects?
  - Clearly there is a great deal of love and compassion woven into these covenants. The language here reads less like a king furious over the insolence of a rebellious subject, and more like the broken heart of an abandoned spouse or father, eager for their return and restoration (consider the similarity with the book of Hosea, where his wife Gomer leaves him to be unfaithful and he seeks to restore their marriage).

These verses do not paint a picture of Israel as a faithful partner in God’s promise with her. And yet, God continues to treat his people with an undeserved grace and promise.

- What does this tell us about the nature of God’s promises to his people?
  - The Lord does not allow our failures and disloyalty to prevent him from loving us, pursuing us, or calling us back into his will and way. Our sinfulness should not lead us to hide ourselves from God, but rather to receive his gift of forgiveness and reconciliation.
  - The Lord is faithful even when we are not, and he keeps his promises to us.
  - As we’ve seen in this passage, this does not mean that God won’t discipline us to draw us back onto the path, nor that he won’t allow us to suffer the consequences of our foolishness, but he is merciful, and he wants good for us.
- What do you think it means when the Lord declared he would “put [his] law in their minds and write [his] law and their hearts?” What does it mean to “know the Lord” in this sense?
  - This is almost certainly a prophecy about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians’ hearts. Where God’s people once relied on written laws and priestly judges to mete out God’s wisdom and

justice, Christians, having received the Holy Spirit, have direct and intimate access to the Prince of Peace, the King of Heaven, and the Wise Judge. This isn't permission to be lawless, rather, we are alive to God (Romans 6), leaving sinfulness behind us and being transformed into Christ's likeness.

- We now know the Lord because God, the Holy Spirit, lives in us and bears witness to Jesus.

- **How might we appreciate and use this law placed on our mind and written in our hearts?**

**How do we benefit from knowing the Lord?**

- The access we have to the living God offers us wisdom and clarity; his law can serve to dynamically guide us, convict us, and protect us. Together the church can prayerfully respond to the needs, fears, injustices, pains, hopes, and heart of one another and the world around us because we have access to the power, love, and will of the Lord.
- Facilitator, you may want to take this opportunity to discuss how we can misinterpret or misuse the notion of God's law being with us. Again, this is not an excuse for lawlessness, nor are we meant to use our personal convictions or doctrines to justify ourselves without the faithful council of fellow Christians and deference to the Bible. As Paul writes, "we know in part and prophesy in part." Humility is key here.

We are so very fortunate that God is trustworthy and keeps his promises to us. Take a few moments together as a group and think over some of the promises God has made to his people throughout the Bible, especially promises made to Christians who devote themselves to Jesus.

- **What promises come to mind? Why are you thankful for this promise and what do you imagine it might be like when this promise is fulfilled?**

- Here are a few promises to share with your group: If we seek him we will find him (Mt 7:7); we will find rest for our soul in him who is humble and gentle (Mt 11:28-30); he will strengthen us in our inner beings (Eph 3:14-16); he sets us free from our sins (Jn 8:36, 1 Jn 1:9); everlasting, resurrected life (Jn 3:16); overflowing hope (Rm 15:13); wisdom (Jm 1:5); God is with us (Ps 139:7-12)

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## **PRAYER AND MINISTRY:**

Today's passage shows us how trustworthy God is and how much he has promised us. Consider choosing one of the two options below, or you can do both.

Take a few minutes (2-3) to reflect on the answers given in the last question: "what do you imagine it might be like when this promise is fulfilled?" Silently envision the way God will make that promise so. Imagine how you will feel, what difference it will make for you, whenever (and as often as) those promises are kept. If you're struggling to believe a particular promise might be true, ask the Lord to grow your trust in him and for his help in showing you how he is keeping his promise or how he will keep his promise someday.

In our discussion we spoke about the Lord using discipline to draw us back to his will and way. Prayerfully reflect on ways God has disciplined you to wake you up to yourself or your sinfulness and drawn you back to him. Ask the Lord to show you any areas of your life presently where he would like to draw you back to his will. Believing that God's discipline is good for us, consider praying as a group "Lord, do not let us wander away from you, but intercept us with your rod and draw us back to you."

# GOD'S PROMISE TO NOAH

GENESIS 6:5-22, 8:6-12, 9:1-17

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 2

This discussion will be split into two parts, beginning with a passage from Genesis 6 and concluding with God's subsequent covenant in passages from Genesis 9. Since the primary focus of this series is on God's covenant promises, we recommend you plan to spend significant time in the second half of the discussion guide, which might mean picking 2 or 3 of your favorite questions from the Genesis 6 portion and skipping the rest this time around.

For context, we are beginning our reading in Genesis 6. Tracking backwards from this story, humanity had just been scattered because they attempted to conspire together to usurp God by building a giant temple; before that, in Chapter 4, Cain killed his brother Abel and was cursed and left home for the land of Nod. Before this, in Chapter 3, the woman (eventually named Eve) took and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad and then gave that same fruit to the man and they were cursed and expelled from Eden. In the span of three chapters humanity went from being sinless to humanity's every inclination in thought and heart being entirely evil. This is where we will enter the story today.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This is week two in our series on God's covenants. Throughout this series we will discuss the Lord's promises to his people. These types of promises are called covenants. The Lord's faithfulness seen through these covenants serve as the foundation for us to believe in Christ's Gospel promises.

Last week, we looked at how God makes covenants with his people. Today we're going to focus on one of the first covenants, or promises, God made with his people – to never again destroy the world with a flood. God sent the rainbow as the sign of this covenant. The story of Noah is a fascinating one – let's dig in!

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## OPENING QUESTIONS:

- If you were a zookeeper, what animals would you enjoy visiting every day? Which animals would you be happy to get rid of?
  - Did you have a toy Noah's ark as a child, or have you ever gifted a play ark to a child? Why do you think these are such popular gifts?
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## OPENING PRAYER:

*Dear Lord, thank you for the opportunity to dig into your word and spend time with you and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to see your truth and your wisdom in this very familiar passage – open our hearts to how we can grow in faith and hope as we learn together. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

This is likely a familiar story to many of us, but let's look at it with fresh eyes. We will jump over a few sections but encourage your group to take the time later to read all of Genesis 6-9.

Have someone read Genesis 6:5-22. Thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

- How does the beginning of this story describe the state of the world?
  - v. 5 “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that *every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*”
- How are we told God feels in response to the overwhelming evilness in the world?
  - Regretful and his heart was deeply troubled.
- Are you surprised by this description of God's reaction? What insight does this give us into how God views humanity and the consequences of sinfulness on the world?
  - Consider together how the descriptions of God being regretful and deeply heart-troubled are different from feelings like anger or wrath. This passage clearly indicates that God regretted creating humanity due to their entire sinfulness and the sickness that spread across the world.
  - It might be helpful for your group to note that God was moved to wipe not only all humanity but also all the animals and the birds as well. Something about our sinfulness is so corrupting and destructive that it had spoiled all the rest of creation alongside.
- Do you think you would have made the same decision as God in this situation?
  - Receive all answers. This is a huge question, and one that theologians have written about for ages. On the one hand, this story dramatically undermines the notion that knowledge or innate human goodness can overcome or alter the course of evil. We are at this point only 4 chapters away from humanity living in the shalom of Eden. But within those few short chapters we've devolved to a world hopelessly sin-sick.
  - It seems that the Lord is putting a great deal of hope in Noah and his family to right what had gone wrong with humanity.
  - This problem remains a poignant one for us. We were created to love and serve God, but we constantly face the sin that says “I want to do it my way.” This is a recurring theme through the Bible: 1 Corinthians 2:14; Isaiah 53:6; John 3:16-19; Ephesians 2:1



- In vv. 8-9, what do we learn about Noah's character? Given God's reaction to the state of the rest of the world, how do you imagine he felt about Noah and his family?

Put yourself in Noah's shoes and imagine what it must have been like to be approached by God and instructed to build this ark.

- What do you imagine you would feel? What concerns might you have?
  - Imagine with the group what your neighbors would be saying about you.
  - The world is described as 'corrupt and full of violence' (v. 11) and you are building this huge boat in obedience to God. Do you fear your neighbors?
  - What was it like to round up all those animals and prepare for such a long boat ride?
  - Facilitators: encourage discussion of thoughts, feelings, sights, and sounds. Put yourself in the story.

Have someone read Genesis 8:6-12 and another person(s) read 9:1-17.

- In 9:1-7, the Lord establishes some new laws for Noah, his family, and for all the animals. What directives do you see in these verses?
  - He directed Noah and his family to be multiply and (re)fill the earth
  - Humanity is now permitted to eat the meat of animals
  - But not animals with their blood still in them
  - The taking of a life will "demand and accounting" from the Lord
- What reasons do you see for God creating these new laws?
  - From a practical sense, if the world was down to only the population of the ark, it would need to be filled again
  - It's less clear why humanity was now allowed to eat animals, but this might have to do with the sustainability of humanity or some sort of new relationship between humanity and animals
  - It's likely the strict law preserving human life dually protects the project of repopulating the earth and is a response to the pervasive violence in the world prior to the flood.
  - You might note that vv.1-7 are bookended with the directive to "be fruitful and multiply."

In the beginning of the Lord's covenant (9:9) he states that this is a covenant between him, Noah, all of Noah's descendants, and "with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth."

- Why did God go to so much trouble to see that the animals were saved and then include them in his covenant?
  - 6:7 clearly links the consequences of humanity's sinfulness, and God's reaction to it, with the rest of the creatures of the earth. The Lord's restorative mission through Noah's family was also a restoration mission for the rest of God's creatures. This harkens back to the crucial role the Lord gave humanity in Eden, to have dominion (or responsibility) over all God's creatures.
  - Likewise, God's concern for his creatures is evident when he includes them into the covenant not to flood the earth again

At least twice in this story the Bible tells us that “Noah did everything just as God commanded him.” (6:22, 7:5) God knew how heartbreakingly lost humanity can become when they pursue their own wisdom and not the Lord’s. And Noah, as his story will show us, was sinful and he too would fail to live up to God’s expectations of him, just like we do.

- How can we be encouraged by Noah’s life?
  - Noah’s trust in the Lord saved his life and the life of his family and all of animals of the ark. The Lord used Noah for his purposes because Noah obeyed what the Lord told him to do.
  - Notice here that the Lord’s covenant to Noah and all the animals is not contingent on Noah being obedient to these new laws. Yes, breaking the laws will have dire consequences, but God’s promise is his own to make and to keep and it won’t be broken because of humanity.
- Why did God choose a rainbow as the sign of this covenant? When you see a rainbow in the sky are you reminded of this promise?

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to prayerfully reflect on one or all of these questions. Once they’ve had time to hear from the Lord, depending on the size of your group, consider breaking into twos/threes to answer these questions. Encourage honest sharing, but don’t force anyone to answer. Close with prayer, asking God to help us worship him even in the midst of trials and storms in our life. When Noah came out of the ark, the first thing he did was to build an altar and worship the Lord. So let it be with us.

- In what areas of your life might the Lord look at you as he did Noah and see your faithfulness to him?
- How would your life need to change to have a reputation like Noah?
- How does this story bring you comfort? Where does it challenge you?
- Where are you struggling, and how can this group pray for you this week?

Consider praying this as worship and blessing over your group:

Take my life and let it be consecrated to Thee  
Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise  
Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of Thy love  
Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee

# GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

GENESIS 12:1-9

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 3

Our text today is from Genesis 12. At this point in Genesis Abraham is called Abram (he's renamed Abraham in Genesis 17, *"No longer will you be called Abram [exalted father]; your name will be Abraham [probably "father of many"] for I have made you a father of many nations."*) This study will use "Abram" following the text, but feel free to use Abraham or Abram interchangeably.

This covenant between Abram and the Lord is a big one, and it asks a lot of Abram—who follows the Lord, though with many failures and rebellions along the way. The Lord is faithful to Abram, even though his timing tests Abram's patience. In some ways today's covenant is unique to Abram—God would give him particular protection and favor because God would use him and his offspring to bless the world in distinct ways. On the other hand, the promise that the Lord would bless Abram in order that Abram would be a blessing to others is a helpful way for us as Christians to think about using and multiplying the blessings we've received from a generous God.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week, as we continue on in our series about God's covenants, we will read about the Lord's covenant with Abram. Throughout this series we will discuss the Lord's promises to his people. These are covenants, and they show us God's faithfulness to do what he says he will do. These faith-building stories are the foundation for us to believe in Jesus' Gospel promises.

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## OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever seen someone extraordinarily talented using their talent? Who was it and what was it like to watch them?
- What is one way you enjoy blessing other people?

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## OPENING PRAYER:

*Pray something like this: Good and gracious Lord, we thank you for the opportunity to gather together and immerse ourselves in the words you have prepared for us. Allow us to open ourselves to the message you have for each of us, that we might experience your love, grace, and blessings in this time. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

It has been said that Genesis 12 is a bit of a turning point within the book. It is here that things shift to a brighter future, focused more on God's promises and blessings; at the center these promises is God's grace. In Genesis 12:1-9 we hear the story of God's call to Abram and his promises to him. Let's take some time to look at both of those things.

Have someone read Genesis 12:1-9. Thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

In Genesis 12:1-3 we read of both of God's call and his promises. It begins with God calling Abram to "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you..." The first words of this covenant are commands, requirements, and not easy ones: Go, leave your country.

- What do you imagine it would mean for Abram to leave his country, his people, and his father's household? What are the costs for him uprooting like this?
  - This was a huge ask of someone in those times. It was a patriarchal culture; there were no governmental system to help in the event of difficult times or needs. Your immediate family was your primary line of defense if help was needed and then the community. Neighbors and friends would jump in to help, knowing the favor would be returned if ever needed. In this instance, God **called or commanded** Abram to leave – to leave the security of the land, the family he had known and depended on his whole life. He called him to trust that God would provide for his future. If Abram abandons his family and God fails to come through, he will be in serious trouble.
- How do you imagine Abram felt when the Lord called to him?
- Why do you think he followed the Lord's call?
  - This was a huge ask of someone in those times. It was a patriarchal culture, no governmental system. This was a huge ask of someone in those times. It was a patriarchal culture, no governmental system. God begins the covenant by calling Abram to separate from all that he has known, but not to the point of not associating with others. Quite the opposite. Perhaps Abram was compelled by the Lord's mission for him to bless others? Perhaps he simply recognized the authority and trustworthiness of God and knew that it would be foolish to refuse the Lord.

The Lord instructs Abram to "go to the land I will show you." Not only does God call Abram to leave everyone and everything he has known, but God doesn't even state where he is calling him to go. There are no real specifics on where he will be sending him.

- Have there been times when God has called you to take a leap of faith, to leave the familiar security you know and instead trust that he will provide for you? What was that experience like?

- If you have had an experience of following the Lord into the unknown, what came of that decision? Are you glad you put your faith in him?
  - God calls us to trust him. To leave the safety, security, and comfort of what we know and go where he is calling us. That doesn't always mean leaving a place, but it may mean stepping out to do new things for the Kingdom, serving in ways you've never imagined. Does that excite you? Terrify you? Energize you? Is God currently calling you to trust him in a new situation?

The second part of the call is to be a blessing. Abram must separate from his nation in order to be a blessing to the nations. It's interesting that the blessing the Lord has for Abram requires Abram to leave his father's land and the people who were his community for a new land.

- Why do you think calling Abram to leave was part of the sequence of God's blessing over Abram?
  - Receive all answers. This may have something to do with God wanting to start something entirely new and different. Perhaps God wanted the character of this new nation to be distinct from the one Abram was leaving? Whatever the case, the Lord anticipated the need to designate a land into which he would grow his great nation.

Most of us aren't distinctly called to leave our country and family behind for God's sake (though he absolutely calls many to domestic or foreign missions that require varying degrees of sacrifice like this). But we are all, at times, called to live differently from the world around us to be a blessing to the world. We are called to think differently, have a different set of priorities, world views, goals. We are separated not to flaunt superiority, but rather to be the salt and light. We sometimes must say 'no' to the familiar world so that we can say 'yes' to being used to bless the world. No simple task.

- What are some ways that the Lord calls you to be separate from the culture of the people around you (your workplace, your neighborhood, your family, your friend group)?
- How do you navigate being separate in these ways? What have you learned with this experience?

In v.2 the Lord told Abram he would make his name great. I imagine many of us are suspicious of fame—how people go about becoming famous and what happens when they become famous are often harrowing stories.

- Do you think there's a difference between God making someone's name great and someone making their own name great? What are these differences?
  - God has chosen Abram and he will make his name great – Abram won't make his own name great. In Genesis 11:4, the men of Babel said "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves..." They worked hard to bring a name to themselves, but God did not bless them. God humbles the proud and exalts the humble.
- In what way was Abram's name made great?

- Do you think Abram’s blessings were a blessing to others?
  - This is a complicated question. At points Abram’s descendants would be a blessing to those around them. But much of the time throughout the Bible the sinfulness of God’s people cursed themselves and the nations around them. That said, Jesus, the answer saving blessing for all of humanity would come from the line of Abraham.
- Why might the Lord bless someone (us) in order for them (us) to be a blessing to others?
  - Consider the numerous ways God uses people to bless others. You might discuss with your group the circular nature of blessings—how when we love, care for, and serve others we often feel blessed to do so.
- Share with us a time when someone used something they were blessed with to bless you.

The Lord promised to bless those who blessed Abram. He also promised to curse those who cursed Abram.

- Why do you think God promised to curse Abram’s cursers?
  - Note: In Hebrew the word *umeqalelka* means something like “to hold in contempt.” Another translation might be “those who hold you in contempt I will hold in contempt.”
  - The Lord is making a particular promise to Abram here that emphasizes his specific mission for Abram. Because God intends to use Abram and his descendants as his vehicle for blessing the nations, God is offering Abram unique protection so that Abram can survive and be the father to nation of Israel. You can see evidence of this in Abram’s life—even when he acts unrighteously the Lord helps Abram.
  - Unfortunately, this is not a universal truth in our lives. The Lord certainly enacts justice in our world, and evil does not persist indefinitely. But, we also know from experience that sometimes, on this side of Kingdom, wickedness seems to go unpunished and bad things happen to faithful people. Nonetheless, we are called to forgive, to bless each other, and we trust that Jesus will make all things just again.

Our passage concludes with Abram then building two altars – lasting signs of worshiping and trusting God. He then “called on the name of the Lord.”

- Why do you think Abram responded this way? What was the significance of these altars?
  - This was his sign of commitment, humbling himself, and giving himself to the Lord.
  - Discuss with your group how we might respond similarly to the blessings of God. How might we humble ourselves before the Lord? Have we called upon the name of the Lord and given ourselves completely over to him? If not, what is holding us back?

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to prayerfully ask “What is God calling me to? How does he want me to live out being ‘blessed to be a blessing?’” Take some time for quiet reflection, time to listen for God and what he may be saying to you. If someone in the group has recently had an experience of sensing that God is calling them to something new, take time for them to share about that, what they believe God is saying to them, and pray over them for clarity.

# GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO JOSEPH

## GENESIS 39:1-23

### FACILITATORS:

### WEEK 4

In this lesson we see how God's promise to Abraham continues on in God's presence with his descendant, Joseph. We'll also see God fulfill a dream he gave Joseph early in his life—in spite of all the dramatic challenges that face Joseph. We'll notice here the theme of God's presence and his faithfulness to his promises, even when we don't see the evidence the Lord's faithfulness in our present circumstances.

### INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Welcome to week 4 in our Covenant series. Over these weeks we are looking at the promises God made with his people throughout the early books of the Bible. We're seeing together how the Lord enters into relationship with his people, how he acts on their behalf, and how we take comfort in knowing that God will do what God says he'll do.

In today's passage we're seeing how the Lord's promise to Abram continues on through the life of his descendant, Joseph. God's presence and favor sustained Joseph, in when the circumstances of his life were stacked against him.

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### OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever had a great boss or supervisor? What made them great?
- Can you share with us a time when you've experienced a person who modeled great integrity?

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### OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord it is our pleasure to be with one another and with you today. Lead us in this time we're sharing together, as we read and discuss the story of Joshua, and as we pray with one another, to meet us and reveal yourself and your heart to us. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Our passage today is from the book of Genesis, chapter 39. This chapter demonstrates beautiful symmetry at its beginning and end – opening and closing with a sense of serenity despite all the interruptions and trials Joseph encounters in between.

Have someone read Genesis 39: 1-6. Thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

This chapter demonstrates God's quiet care and control in Joseph's life, and eventually his subtle justification. These first few verses show how the Lord had taken an awful event and worked it out for the good of Joseph, illustrating the journey of a servant: faithful in little and then progressively training for authority in much. Depending on the translation, verses 2 and 3 describe that Joseph "prospered," "became a successful man," and "was made successful." And then, moving through the story from verses 4-6 Joseph is favored, blessed, and promoted.

- Can anyone remind us how Joseph came to be in Egypt?
  - Receive all answers. Use the summary below to fill in any gaps. You might emphasize Joseph's dreams as God's promises to him—this is the promise of his story, tying to the theme of our series.

Early in his life, Joseph was treated as Israel's (the man not the nation) favored son. Joseph had two prophetic dreams that would come to be understood to be God's promises over his destiny. These dreams of Joseph's future, that he would be like a moon with eleven stars (his brothers) bowing before it. This enraged his brothers and they sold Joseph to some Ishmaelites, who proceeded to take him to Egypt (a foreign country), and he was sold as a slave. Genesis 39, from which we've read, picks up from there with the description of what Joseph's life becomes while a servant to Potiphar.

- Where do you see God at work in this first portion of the story (Genesis 37 + 39:1-6)?
  - 1 The Lord was with Joseph **so that** he prospered...; v.3 ...the Lord was with him... the Lord gave him success...v.5 ...the Lord blessed the household; The blessing of the Lord...
- What do you imagine it would feel like to be Joseph at this point in his story? Do you think he might have chalked all of this up as coincidence? Or do you think he may have seen the Lord at work?

The story takes a turn beginning from verse 7-23.

Have someone read Genesis 39:7-20

Potiphar's wife unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Joseph numerous times, and then she frames him. Imagine that you are Joseph in this situation.

- What thoughts would be going through your mind? What emotions might be sweeping over you – as your master *burned against you with anger* and imprisoned you over a false accusation?

- Can you think of someone you know whose life demonstrates the integrity, humility, respect, and honesty Joseph shows here. How so?
  - Receive all answers. Consider using this as an opportunity to call out these qualities in members of your group or in your church to recognize and encourage their model of righteousness.

Multiple commentators and scholars have mentioned that it is unusual for Joseph to have been imprisoned versus executed for the accusation he faced from his master's wife. In a sense, although this was a terrible event of injustice, Joseph is being shown mercy.

- Can you think of time that you or someone you know experienced mercy (either perceived at the hand of God or people) when perhaps a worse outcome was deserved and/or expected?

As mentioned earlier, Genesis 39 has beautiful symmetry to it.

- Where do you see God at work in the closing portion of this text (vv. 21-23)?
  - Possible answers include:
    - Vs. 21 ...the Lord was with him...
    - Vs. 21 ...he showed him kindness and granted him favor...
    - Vs. 23 ...the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success...

Did you notice the refrain from Genesis chapter 39? Verses 2, 3, 21, and 23 all stated *The Lord was with Joseph*. However, no matter how successful or prosperous Joseph was, he still faced trouble, he was still the victim of injustice.

- How do you come to terms with this – the fact that even though Joseph was blessed and doing good work, he still encountered trials?
  - We live in a fallen world where sometimes good people suffer and wicked people flourish. Justice is not always done on earth. This is one of the many reasons the Gospel is such incredibly good news. Everything that is wrong with our world, including all of its injustices, will eventually be exposed and made right again. In the meantime, we pray that God's Kingdom will come on earth and justice will be done.
- In what ways might someone be tempted to not rest, press into, or pursue God's faithfulness when facing trials and temptations? That is, why can it seem easier to take matters into our own hands?
  - Facilitator, you may want to share an answer here to set the tone of the discussion. If you would like to pursue vulnerability with your group here you can share an area of your life that you struggle handing control over to God.
  - If/when someone shares something personal here, listen well and resist the urge to fix their struggle. Thank them for sharing.

As a young man the Lord revealed his plans for Joseph to him in his dreams. God was faithful to Joseph and with Joseph even amidst terrible and unjust circumstances. Still, Joseph remained a man of

integrity—obedient to the way of the Lord.

- How could this be possible? How could any person, living through such lows and such highs as we've read about maintain such outstanding character?
  - Facilitator, encourage your group to take time to reflect on the message of this series, God's promises and faithfulness to us! Joseph stayed true and strong **in the Lord**! His circumstances/outcomes were not entirely dependent on himself.
  - It is only by the power and strength of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, that we can walk in his wisdom and will. God was present with Joseph. He is present with us. When we sin, we pray for the conviction, forgiveness, and redemption of the God's grace. When we walk in step with the Spirit, we can see clearly how faithful and present the Lord is.

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

In today's passage, we've reflected on God's faithfulness to Joseph in the Old Testament. Share with your group that Prayer and Ministry time will begin with silent reflection (2-3 minutes). Ask people to quietly open themselves – in heart and mind – to hear from the Lord during this time of silence.

Pray over the group something like this:

*Lord, thank you for our time together discussing your Word in the scripture. Please, be with us and continue to speak to, and through, us in this silence. Remind us of the ways you demonstrate your faithfulness to us in our everyday lives.*

After the time of silence, encourage people to share any prayer requests regarding the following prompts:

Did the Lord stir something inside you during this time of silence for which you'd like this small group community to pray on your behalf?

Do you want to pray for more revelation of God's faithfulness in your life – a particular area of your life?

Do you have people in your life for whom you'd like to lift up in prayer – that their eyes may be opened and their ears hear the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord?

# GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO MOSES

## EXODUS 13:17-14:29

### FACILITATORS:

### WEEK 5

As we continue in our study of covenant stories from the Old Testament, we have the privilege of digging into the story of God's faithfulness to Moses and the Israelites at the Red Sea. This passage of Scripture recounts one of the defining moments in Judeo-Christian covenant history. In fact, our practice of Holy Communion is closely tied to this and the surrounding Scriptural accounts of the Passover and Exodus.

One additional note for your preparation: it is not outside of the realm of possibility that, during your discussions today, questions will come up regarding the language of God "hardening Pharaoh's heart." Rather than skip over those passages, we have included them so that you can wrestle with that together. However, as facilitator, it may help your guidance of the discussion to bear in mind that the focus and point of the covenant story of Scripture is not the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but of God's heart and faithfulness to his people—his heart is inclined to be inclusive and salvific.

There may be more questions here than you will have time to get to, so consider ahead of time which questions you'd most like to ask in this discussion.

### INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we continue our study of the Old Testament stories that shape our understanding of our covenantal God—a God who is committed to his people. His steadfast love and salvific power are displayed in Exodus 14 in the account of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea. This account is also closely connected to the story of Jesus and many of our own stories, so in that spirit, we will be paying attention to how this is *God's story*—about himself and his people.

### OPENING QUESTIONS:

- What is one of your all-time favorite stories? (It could be a movie, book, or even a well-loved family anecdote.)
  - Facilitators, feel free to allow space for storytelling. This prepares us for the narrative of God, but it is also great community time—shared knowledge of stories builds trust in your group?
- What makes these stories *so good*? Is there any specific elements in them that make them good stories?

As we consider these great stories in our lives, let's settle in and prepare for a great Bible story from Exodus 14. But before we join in this epic moment in the life of God's people, let's pray.

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## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray this prayer, adapted from Douglas McKelvey's *Every Moment Holy*, or pray something like this:  
*Give us ears to hear, O Spirit of God, what notes the reading of this story would strike, and what melody it would draw forth from the tuned strings of our own souls. Let the honest responses of our hearts to this reading grant new insight into the stories your grace is already telling in our own lives. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Consider setting the stage for this story by asking, "Who can share with us about what led Pharaoh to release God's people from Egypt?"

God sent ten plagues, culminating in the Passover, where the Lord struck down all the firstborn sons throughout Egypt, but for those with lambs' blood on their doorframe—these the Lord would pass by and "not permit the destroyer to enter" their homes. That night Egypt was filled with wailing and Pharaoh said to Aaron and Moses, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me." The Egyptians urged the Israelites to flee quickly, for fear that they would all die. And so, Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites flee Egypt into the desert. That is where our story begins.

Have one or two people read of Exodus 13:17-14:18. Because this is a longer story, we're going to split it into two parts. (This is a remarkable, dramatic story—encourage your readers to savor it. Be sure to thank them each for reading!)

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## DISCUSSION:

- Why do you suppose God led the Israelites on the longer route (stopping to camp near Pi Hahiroth by the Red Sea)?
  - 3:17 says this was to avoid the Philistine country, for fear the Israelites might return to Egypt. 14:4 says the Lord would harden Pharaoh's heart in order to gain glory for God's self. God demonstrated his own power and commitment to the Israelites, while contrasting this with the fickle hearts of the Israelites who made their desire to return to Egypt known. It's clear by the story so far the Pharaoh considered himself an equal adversary to Yahweh, and felt he had rightful claim over the Israelites. The Lord will not permit Pharaoh to continue with this costly delusion (especially if it were to mean the re-enslavement of Israel).
  - This sets up the climactic events to come.
- How did the Israelites respond?
  - With fear and woe – they accused Moses of bringing them out to die violently
  - Notice how the Israelites cry out in dismay and distress to Moses, and consider this in light of Exodus 13:17. "For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'" It seems the Lord knew his people well enough to anticipate this.

- Do you sympathize with the Israelites' reaction? Do you imagine you would have the same fear?
  - Ask the follow up question "why or why not?"

We might be inclined to think we would have more faith in the Lord than they did, that we would trust the God who'd led us this far to protect us. In fairness, that might be true. There are plenty of examples of people trusting the Lord in spite of the appearance of certain disaster. We may also find ourselves joining them, concerned with the looming danger before us and inattentive to God's presence and power. Let's consider how this plays out in our lives today.

- Have you ever felt "stuck" in place, or found yourself staring down something that seemed it would inevitably overtake you?
  - Answers may vary. Consider having an example of your own ready. Encourage and empathize with each testimony. If group members are feeling "stuck" now, take note and do your best to guide the discussion in such a way that these group members experience the hope of God's intervention in our lives.
  - At the end of sharing, you might note how often God has been faithful to your group in seeing you through these events.

In 14:13-14 we read, "But Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will perform for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again, ever. The Lord will fight for you, while you keep silent.'" (NASB)

- What stands out to you in these verses?
  - Receive all answers. You might note the often-repeated phrase "do not fear"; The NASB uses the word "salvation." From the very beginning God has been doing the work of saving his people—the work culminated and completed in Christ's life, death, and resurrection; notice the Lord emphasizing his ownership in the protection of Israel, and that they're simply to "keep silent" (NASB) or "be still" (NIV).

Let's move to the dramatic ending of this story. Have someone read Exodus 14:19-29. Be sure to thank them for reading!

- Consider vv. 19, 21, 24, and 27. What do you notice about who is acting in these verses?
  - The Lord is the one doing most of the action, but there is clear participation from Moses and the Israelites. This simultaneously expresses the incredible might and powerful defense of the Lord (faithful to his promise) and how God uses Moses and the Israelites to be cooperative agents in this work.
  - Notice how the Lord miraculously parted the sea for the Israelites (a move they were entirely incapable of), but he left it to them to pass through—left foot, then right foot—trusting in God's faithfulness, with walls of water on either side.

- What are the implications for us in this scene—God splitting the seas to save us, while also inviting us into cooperating in his work, and directing us to walk in faith?
  - We are helpless to save ourselves out of such peril. But by the gift of God’s grace and salvation—first through the Red Sea, and fulfilled in the gift of life through Jesus’ death and resurrection—we are given life. Perhaps this is an opportunity to encourage small group members that God has done miraculous, salvific work on our behalf, but this doesn’t mean he’s removed every difficult situation from our lives. Sometimes, he brings us to situations that we must walk through in order to strengthen us and grow our faith in him—but he will never leave us stranded in our difficult moments. He has promised us his help and his presence, and he is faithful to his promises.

Imagine yourself as one of the Israelites, passing through the Red Sea, walls of water on your left and right, Pharaoh’s army at your back, separated by the pillar of cloud and the Angel of the Lord who’d fallen back to stand guard.

- What do you imagine this would be like?
  - Encourage your group to use their senses to enter the story here. What specific images are you drawn to in this scene? What sounds do you hear? What does it smell like? What emotions are you feeling and how is your body reacting to them?

The Exodus story is a foundational one for God’s people. It is poetically revisited in the Psalms, it’s remembered annually for centuries in the observation of Passover, and centuries later the prophet Isaiah spoke hope to Israel in exile, reminding them of God’s faithfulness in Exodus and that God would see them through their exile and do a new, incredible saving work (through Jesus).

- What is it about this story that makes it so fundamental to the Bible and the whole story of God’s people?
  - Consider together what elements in the Exodus make this a compelling story. We see in this story the seeming hopelessness of the Israelites’ situation is an incredibly tense situation that is resolved only by the action of God. The narrative arc includes rising tension, a climactic moment, and resolution.
  - We resonate with this type of storytelling because we regularly experience all of this in our moments and seasons of crises—and we long for the Lord’s help in the resolution. The promise of God’s presence and help is something we will never grow out of.

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## PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Consider breaking into groups of 2 or 3 and sharing where you have either seen God’s salvific hand in your own life, or where you are waiting on God to break through in a situation in your life. Be sure to leave time to pray together for those praiseworthy testimonies and for all needs that are voiced.

There may be some in the group who have not yet received the salvific work of God in their lives. If today is the first time for one of your group members to say, “I need God’s saving action in my life,” spend some time praying with that person.



# GOD'S FAITHFULNESS & THE LAW

EXODUS 19:3-7; 20:1-17

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 6

In this discussion we will reference a few different passages, including 1 Chronicles 29:2-5 and 1 Peter 2:4-10. You may want to have these passages bookmarked already in your Bible or have someone in your group prepared to read them ahead of time.

We will be discussing God's covenant with Moses and how it relates to the Law. For the sake of our discussion, it might be helpful to note that we are not merely talking about the 10 Commandments, (though these are a part of the Law), nor are we speaking strictly about the books of the Bible called the Law books (or the *torah*). Instead, we are speaking about the will and way of the Lord, the Wisdom of God relative to doing what is right in our eyes. This is the Law spoken of in Jeremiah 31:33 that is placed in the minds and written in the hearts of God's people.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

We are on week 6 of our Covenant series, where we are exploring God's demonstrations of his trustworthiness. The Lord does this by making promises to his people. These are relational promises, and as we'll see today, many of them come with a conditional agreement that God's people will take on a responsibility to do as the Lord asks of them. Even though humanity fails to live up to their end of the bargain, the Lord continues to do what he said he will do. These faith-building stories are the foundation for us to believe in Jesus' Gospel promises.

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## OPENING QUESTIONS:

- What is your most treasured possession? What emotions/memories are conjured by this treasure?

Today we will be exploring God's Faithfulness and the Law, but before we do let's open in prayer.

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## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Father, thank you that we can gather today to study your word. Guide our discussion that we might be reminded of your constant faithfulness. Amen.*

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## SCRIPTURE:

Our first passage today is in chapter 19 of Exodus. The Israelites have been on the journey out of Egypt for three months and have arrived at the base of Mount Sinai. Before being given the 10 Commandments and the rest of the law, Moses is summoned by God to the top of the mountain.

Have someone read Exodus 19:3-7. Remember to thank them for reading.

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## DISCUSSION:

Moses is to remind the people what God has done for them and now it is time for them to uphold their end of the covenant. If Israel keeps God's covenant, they are told they will be God's "treasured possession."

- What do you think God means when he tells Moses that "out of all the nations" the people of Israel are God's *treasured possession*?
  - The Hebrew word for treasured possession, used for the first time in the Hebrew Bible in this passage, is *segullah*. This word means so much more than a memento from your last vacation.
  - In 1 Chronicles 29:2-5, David gives his treasures (*segullah*) of gold and silver to his son Solomon to build the temple of the Lord. David is giving his greatest and most treasured possessions back to the Lord. This type of possession was extremely valuable and worthy of a special honor. God is saying that the people of Israel are his greatly adorned, valuable, personal possessions that he treasures and adores and does not want to part with.

Being told they were God's chosen people led them to **arrogance** and **pride** rather than the humility, responsibility, and awe God intended.

- Why do you think that is?
- In what ways do we see the same issues in the church today?

Israel is also told they are a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

- What was the role of a priest in the Old Testament?
  - Priests were meant to play the liminal role between God and humanity. They were the ones responsible for practicing the love of God by allocating the tithed resources to the widows, orphans, and immigrants. They administered restorative, redemptive rituals like the variety of sacrifices and body washing. They were responsible for attending to physical health and sanitary cleanliness and they offered their people spiritual direction and wise counsel. Priests were meant to bless people on behalf of God and bring the people into reverence, trust, and worship before the Lord.
- At the time of Mount Sinai there was no group of people within the Israelite community chosen to serve as priests. Why then is God calling Israel a kingdom of priests?
  - There was no group of people within the Israelite community that had been selected to be priests, so God is saying that the entire nation is a kingdom of priests—those set apart by God to relate to and serve Him directly.

- Being called priests is a position of great privilege and access to God. This privilege came with the responsibility of helping the world know the Lord and experience his grace and provision.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-10.

Here Peter has quoted Exodus 19, but he has expanded the covenant to all people that have believed in Christ Jesus.

- **As the new chosen people, what are we meant to do that Israel failed to do?**
  - In verse 9 Peter declares that we are to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”
  - We are to share that God gave up His most precious treasure, His Son, Jesus, to build up the living temple of believers. We are also his treasured possession that He sent His Son to save since the law could not.

After preparing the people for the giving of the law, Moses ascended the mountain again to be given the 10 Commandments, which are the core of the covenant being made between God and the people of Israel. When the commandments are eventually written on tablets of stone, they are placed in the ark which is then referred to as the “ark of the covenant.”

Have someone read Exodus 20:1-17.

- **After reading through these commandments, which of them is the hardest to follow/understand?**

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied to love God and to love our neighbor.

- **How do you see these commandments reflected in the 10 Commandments?**
  - The first 4 commandments focus on the relationship between people and God while the other 6 commandments focus on relationships between humans. These commandments have outlined how we are to love God and others.
- **Do you think the 10 commandments is an exhaustive list of ways we are called to love the Lord and love each other? If not, what are other ways we express such love?**
  - You might consider the number of ways loving God and others are exemplified throughout the Bible. 1 Corinthians 13 describes several ways we can express love to others. Jesus, throughout the gospels, models for us over and over again the variety of ways we can love God and others.

After the people of Israel affirm that they will follow all of these commandments, the rest of the story of the Old Testament is primarily about their continued failure to do exactly that. When Jesus is teaching the Sermon on the Mount he says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17).

- **How has Jesus fulfilled the law that was given to Moses?**
  - As far as the Law reveals to us our inadequacies and our helplessness to overcome sin, Jesus has overcome that sin on our behalf—this is his grace extended to us. The Law is now placed in the minds and written on the hearts of Christians by the Holy Spirit that lives within us—who empowers

us and transforms us so that we can love God and one another—by his grace.

- How does God's faithfulness to the Israelites and the relational contract of the 10 Commandments give us insight into who God is and what God wants for us?
  - Notice that the laws are given to Israel within the story of the Lord saving them from Egypt and making them his treasured people. He has heard their cries for help, rescued them, and claimed them as his own. As people saved and adopted he now directs them to multiply the blessings he gave them. First by returning his love, and then by blessing each other (and the rest of the world) by practicing love.
  - Considering all the ways we have been blessed by God, we can now multiply these blessings as the Spirit moves and works through us?

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## **PRAYER AND MINISTRY:**

If you are in a larger group, consider breaking into 2 or 3 groups for prayer. Spend some time this week contemplating what it means to be God's treasured possession. Pray for one another that this concept could become rooted in each of you this week. Pray for ways that you can be seen by others as God's Priesthood and Holy Nation.

# GOD'S FAITHFULNESS & THE COVENANT RENEWED

JOSHUA 24:1-26

## FACILITATORS:

## WEEK 7

This lesson begins with quite a bit of introduction into the book of Joshua. We've included this to help emphasize the consistency between the God who forgave his crucifiers from the cross with the God who warred against enemy nations. Use what of it you find helpful and summarize the rest. But it's worth considering how often the God of the Old Testament is erroneously painted as merciless and cruel relative to a merciful God in the New Testament. The Lord is consistent in his patience, love, and mercy—and also in his defense of those in need and judgement against of violence and idolatry.

## INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

Today we are concluding our study on God's covenants and promises. We'll see how the Lord again and again shows himself faithful to his people. This faithfulness is the foundation of our trust in the Gospel of Jesus.

## OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Share with us a time when you witnessed an event where two evenly matched individuals or teams went head-to-head. What do you remember about the event? What did you feel at the end of it?

Today we will read together a summary of God's faithfulness to Joshua and the Israelite people as they entered and found their home in the Promised Land.

## OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord thank you again for your faithfulness. Because of these witnesses of your trustworthiness, we know that we can rest in your promises and hope for what you have said will come. We love you, Lord, and we seek to encounter you today. Amen.*

## SCRIPTURE:

Our passage comes from the book of Joshua. The book of Joshua tells the story of God leading the Israelites, whom he'd rescued from Egypt, into the Promised Land. From there, the Lord converts, drives out, or defeats several different Canaanite tribes on behalf of the Israelite army. These victories are the fulfilment of God's promises to

Moses and the Israelites: that he would be with them and give them a land of their own wherein they would be his treasured and blessed people; positioned to be a blessing to the nations around them.

Before we get to our main passage, let's begin with a key passage for understanding the whole book of Joshua. Joshua and his people have just crossed the Jordan river with the Ark of the Covenant and they are preparing to enter into Jericho, the first city in the Promised Land.

Joshua 5:13-15

*Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"*

*"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"*

*The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

- What do you think is the significance of this passage? How does this set the stage for a book full of violent battles with Canaanite tribes?
  - This is not a book about God endorsing one nation's army over another in violent conquest. Rather, this is the story of the Lord providing a land for the Israelites that had been held by the violent, perverse, child-sacrificing Canaanites. And even then, there are instances of Canaanites turning to worship the Lord.
  - What's most clear in this passage, and throughout the book is that as often as Israel attempts to wage war without the Lord, or as often as they are not obedient to God, they were defeated.
  - Today's main passage summarizes and emphasizes God's role in Israel's place in the Promised Land.

Have someone read Joshua 24:1-26.

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## DISCUSSION:

- Why do you think the Lord, speaking through Joshua, began this address by reminding the Israelites of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau?
  - The Lord is reminding them that long ago, even before their ancestors were enslaved in Egypt God had chosen them, been with them, and had plans for them. He's been faithful to his promises for generations. Note that these are stories about what God did for and through these patriarchs.
- How have stories about what God has done in generations past influenced your faith? What can you share about the faith of your family or members of the Church that have gone before you?
  - Facilitator, consider sharing a story of someone of an older generation's faith with the group, and how that faith has influenced your or the church.

- As you were hearing the number ways the Lord defended and led Israel to victory, did any stand out to you?
  - You might draw attention here to the God protecting Israel by refusing to hear the curses of Balaam, or the mention of Jericho which fell because the Israelites marched around the city and blew their trumpets, or the instance where the Lord sent hornets to drive out their enemies. This is evidence of God's provisional hand showing "you did not do it with your own sword or bow."
- Can you relate to the Israelites in this story? Can you recall an instance where God acted in a way that would have otherwise been impossible?

The Lord reminds Israel that they are the blessed beneficiaries of land they did not toil, cities they did not build, and vineyards they and olive groves they did not plant. This was a healthy, humbling reminder of how generous the Lord had been to those that did nothing to deserve the blessing.

- In what ways might that be true for us? Is there anything we have benefitted solely from the generosity of the Lord?
- Why might we be tempted to credit all our successes to ourselves rather than appreciating the Lord's generosity?
- What do you think v. 15 means? Why would Joshua give them the option of rejecting the Lord and serving other gods?
  - This seems to be an important, new deciding moment for Israel. Clearly there was a potential that they would fall into a syncretistic type of faith, or that they would allow the gods of the nations they were living in to seduce them.
- How did the Israelites respond to Joshua's question about which god they would serve?
  - They emphatically swore allegiance to the Lord. But Joshua knew better and said so. And (to spoil the ending) Israel quickly gave into syncretism and idolatry, and entered a downward spiral detailed in the book of Judges.

This chapter concludes with Joshua making a covenant for the people, with the Lord, that the Israelites would throw off all other gods and serve only Yahweh. They decidedly didn't. And this seems like an important place to end our series on covenants: contrasting the faithfulness of God's promises to us with our dramatic inability to live up to the promises we make to God.

- Since we are incapable of keeping our promises to God, should we abandon any attempts to do what the Lord asks or commands of us? Should we stop trying to bless or love God and others?
  - Of course not. We continue to bless and love God and each other, though we will always do it imperfectly. We are profoundly blessed by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to convict us, correct us, and restore us when we fail or rebel against God. One of the things the Lord is faithful to do is to discipline us away from our waywardness and towards his will for us. That too is a gift.



- How have these stories of God’s unshakeable, powerful faithfulness influenced your faith?
    - If, in these past few weeks, you’ve been impressed or struck by anything new, or reminded again, that has influenced your perception of God’s faithfulness and give you a new kind of hope, share that with the group. Or, if these stories have all been familiar to you, consider sharing about how these stories have shaped your faith over the years, from when you first heard them.
  - How can we, as a small group, be in the habit of blessing each other with reminders of God’s faithfulness?
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## **PRAYER AND MINISTRY:**

As we close the series, take a few moments to reflect on some of the stories you’ve shared with each other about God’s faithfulness in your lives. Remind each other of the stories that have been shared.

Take several minutes praying for each individual in your group. First thanking God for how he’s been faithful to them thus far. Then ask that God would continue to build their faith, that they would always trust him and rely on him in times of need or in times of plenty.