

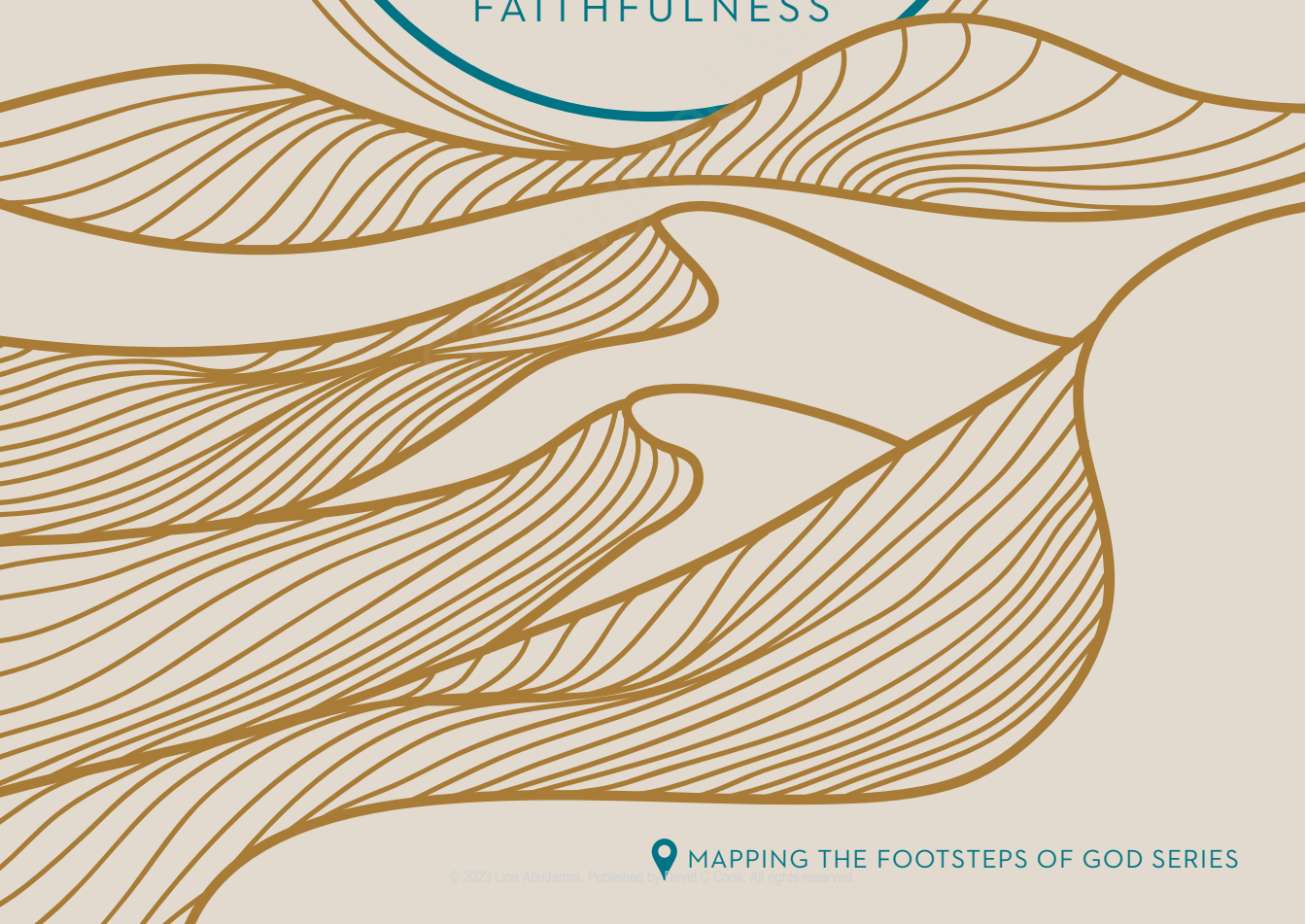
AN INTERACTIVE
BIBLE STUDY

Includes Six-Session
Video Series

LINA
ABUJAMRA

Through the Desert

A STUDY ON GOD'S
FAITHFULNESS



MAPPING THE FOOTSTEPS OF GOD SERIES

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Books for Courageous Women
from David C Cook

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THROUGH THE DESERT
Published by Esther Press
an imprint of David C Cook
4050 Lee Vance Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80918 U.S.A.

Integrity Music Limited, a Division of David C Cook
Brighton, East Sussex BN1 2RE, England

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ISBN 978-0-8307-8421-9
eISBN 978-0-8307-8422-6

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Printed in the United States of America
First Edition 2023

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

102022

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Session 1

Introduction

Genesis 1-2

**Watch the
session 1 video now.
The video is available at
DavidCCook.org/access,
with access code
DesertPlaces.**

1. The story of the Bible is the story of God and His _____ to His people.
2. The story of God's faithfulness is best understood by mapping His footsteps and presence with His people in _____.
3. The story of God is never without _____ and is always deeply personal.

Video Group Discussion Questions

After watching the video, discuss the following questions in your group.

- 📍 In Genesis 3:9, God finds Adam and Eve and asks them this question: “Where are you?”
How would you answer Him if He were to ask you that question today?

- 📍 Think about where God has placed you right now. What kind of place is it? Do you long to leave it or can you see God’s faithfulness in it?

- 📍 How can you understand God’s faithfulness to Adam and Eve even though He threw them out of the garden of Eden?

- 📍 In the video, Lina said, “The story of God is not a story with me as its hero.” How did you react to this statement? How have you made studying the Bible about you in the past?

- 📍 The story of God is deeply personal. In what ways have you experienced God personally? Where in your life do you long to experience Him even more?

Faithful

faith·ful | \ 'fāth-fəl \

Definition of *faithful*

- 1: steadfast in affection or allegiance: LOYAL // a *faithful* friend
- 2: firm in adherence to promises or in observance of duty:
CONSCIENTIOUS // a *faithful* employee
- 3: given with strong assurance: BINDING // a *faithful* promise
- 4: true to the facts, to a standard, or to an original // a *faithful* copy
- 5: *obsolete*: full of faith¹

Faithfulness has to do with being reliable. It has to do with fidelity, firmness, stability, trustworthiness, trueness to one's word, and dependability. While no earthly person is 100 percent faithful, the Bible teaches that God is 100 percent faithful in all He does in accordance with His divine character. The fact that God is faithful is one of the most reassuring attributes about Him.

We are going to build on our understanding of the faithfulness of God in the weeks to come. For now, take some time to pray, asking God to show you where in your life you say you believe God but where your heart is far from trusting Him yet.

Typically, our struggle is in our desert places, but the good news is that God is committed to getting us through those desert places stronger in faith. He's a God who is that good.

He's a God who is faithful!



Week 1: Invited into the Desert

Deuteronomy 7:9

“Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.”

Introduction

“Trust me,” he said. I was in Colorado and had just signed up to go on one of those adventure zip line things across a huge canyon. The canyon was wider than anything I’d ever set my eyes on. I looked at my guide, then looked at the vast opening in front of me and wondered for the umpteenth time what had possessed me to follow him so blindly. I heard the clip of the harness being tightened around my waist but still couldn’t wrap my mind around the notion that in just a few minutes I would be putting my life into the hands of a man I barely knew and a thin piece of rope hanging from the edge of the mountain.

“Trust me.” Two of the most overused yet undervalued words in the English language. You’ve heard the used-car salesman promise you that you’re not buying a lemon—“Trust me,” he says. You’ve looked into the eyes of your doctor who promises it’s not going to hurt that much—“Trust me,” she tells you. You’ve had parents and spouses promise you they would never leave you or harm you, but an unexpected death or a tragic divorce has left you reeling. Trust me.

I grew up in west Beirut, Lebanon, during one of the worst civil wars my birth country has gone through. I was taught from a very young age not to trust anyone. That pattern has followed me throughout much of my life. When I hear the words “trust me,” I roll my eyes.

“Prove it,” I whisper under my breath. “Show me you’re worthy of my trust first, and then I’ll think about it.”

Maybe you’re like me. You struggle with trusting others. You’ve been there and done that. You’ve given away your trust too quickly and have been deeply burned because of it. You’ve learned to keep your guard up. You’ve learned to watch where you’re going, to double-check the harness two or three times first, or maybe you’ve decided to skip the ride altogether.

Here are some of the most common reasons we struggle with trust:

- You’ve trusted people who have disappointed you completely.
- You’ve been taught from a young age that no one can be trusted.
- You’ve been hurt before and don’t want it to happen again.
- You had expectations that were unmet by others.

Sadly, our trust issues with other humans have a tendency to erode our relationship with God. When God tells us to trust Him, it’s no surprise that we struggle with it. We’ve been trained to doubt. We’ve been trained to keep our guard up. We’ve been taught that sooner or later people will let us down.

Though we’re talking about trusting God now, deep down most of us aren’t sure God will do all He has promised. His Word seems too good to be true in a world that is broken. The truth is, we’re afraid to trust God. What if God lets us down? What if the miracle we’re hoping for doesn’t take place? At the first sign of difficulty, we want to cut and bail.

“I shouldn’t have trusted so easily,” we tell ourselves. “Why did I ever think things would be different?”

Deep down, even though we say we believe God, most of us really struggle with trusting Him. In this study, I hope to help you understand what’s behind our trust issues with God. Peace in the Christian’s life flows out of a heart that trusts God even when everything in life points against Him.

In this week’s homework, we’re going to spend time with the first guy who truly learned to trust God: Abraham. In Genesis 12, God called Abraham to follow Him, and Abraham did. What’s amazing about the story is that right after God made Abraham an incredible promise, Abraham was invited to leave the comfort of home and head into the desert. I suppose you can

say that God's invitation to Abraham was to learn to trust Him in the desert places. Abraham's life did not turn out to be easy, but it was rich—so rich that we're still talking about him today.

Our goal this week is to begin to understand the connection between God's promises to us and our ability to thrive in desert places. Our ability to make it in desert places rests on our willingness to hang on to God's promises. The more familiar we become with God's promises to us, the easier it will be for us to trust Him in the desert. But it all starts with God's promise to us.

Our ability to make it in desert places rests on
our willingness to hang on to God's promises.

Remember that the hero of our story is not Abraham. It's God! It's God's footsteps we're tracking throughout the pages of Scripture. It's God's faithfulness we're focused on. When our Christianity hasn't lived up to our expectations, it's important to stop and figure out why. The more we understand who God is, the more we become convinced of His goodness even in our most difficult circumstances, and the easier it will be for us to say yes, as Abraham did, when He asks:

“Will you trust Me?”

Day 1: Father Abraham

Reading: Genesis 11:27–12:9

Theme: God invites me into the desert to get to know Him better.

My favorite movie growing up was *The Sound of Music*. I watched it eighteen times before I graduated from high school. Who am I kidding? It's still my favorite movie. Are you impressed? You should be! At one point in the movie, Maria the governess sings a song that says: "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start."

I agree with her. If we're going to grow in trusting God, we have to start at the very beginning. While our introductory lesson focused on Adam and Eve, this week we're going to spend our time in Genesis 12. We're going to become familiar with the story of Abraham, our forefather, and learn how God taught Abraham to trust Him.

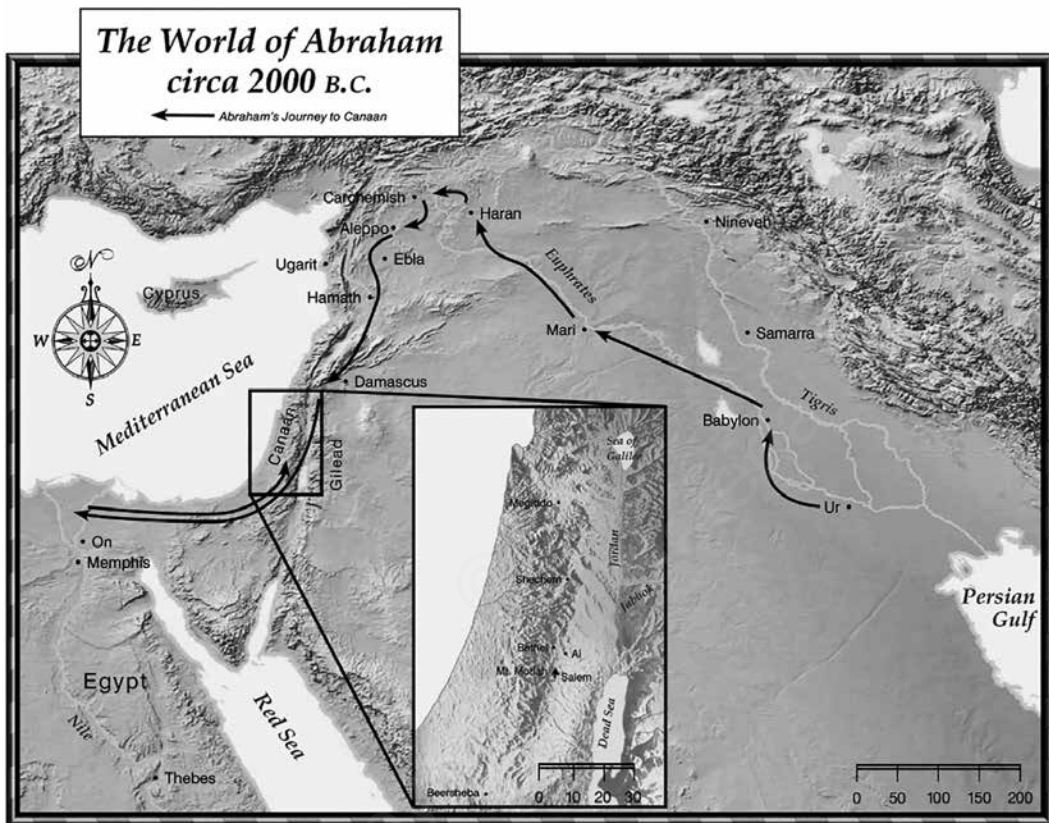
But here's the first thing you need to know: It all started with a promise. It was a promise that propelled Abraham from the comfort of home into the wild of the desert. It was this promise that would change the course of Abraham's life. It was this promise that awakened Abraham to the reality of God and His presence in his life. It's a promise that continues to impact your life and mine today.

📍 In order to better understand what I mean, read Genesis 11:27–12:9. Summarize in your own words what God's Word says.

One of the most important tools in studying the Bible is to learn where the text falls in the biblical narrative. In other words, let's get some context.

📍 Read Genesis 11:27–32 and jot down a sketch of Abraham's family tree.

Check out this map of Bible lands in Abraham's day.



Locate the place where Abraham came from, Ur of the Chaldeans, and trace his journey all the way from the land of Haran to the land of Canaan, where God had called him to go.

Abraham's life wasn't perfect. Even before God called Abraham out of Haran, he had some struggles.

📍 Identify some of the problems in Abraham's life before God called him to leave home.

The world Abraham was living in was also challenging. Let's get a feel for the cultural context that Abraham was living in during those days. Look up these Bible passages for help:

- Genesis 11:1–9
- Joshua 24:2

While the whole world was worshipping idols and false gods, God Almighty made Himself known to Abraham with a promise. In Genesis 12:1–3, God reveals the promise. This promise is called a covenant. It's impossible to understand the biblical narrative without understanding the covenant God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. So much of what we believe about God is rooted in this covenant. But before we break down the Abrahamic covenant a bit more, read the text again and pick out what it was about Abraham that caused God to choose him out of all the humans on the planet to become the father of His chosen people.

Did you find anything?

Check again.

Still nothing? You're right.

The story of God choosing Abraham tells us a whole lot more about God and His goodness than it does Abraham's worth. This is a key principle in growing our trust in God:

God chooses us not because we are good but because He is good.

📍 Let's make this a little more personal. Can you summarize your life in a few lines? What are some of the highlights and tragedies that characterize your family of origin? Is there anything about your life that caused God to call you to Himself? If so, what?

Now let's dig deeper into the covenant God made to Abraham, referred to today as the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant was first made in Genesis 12:1–4, then reiterated in Genesis 15. It's the first of eight covenants God makes to His people.

In Old Testament days, a covenant had a few essential elements to it. It was made between two or more parties. It was a binding commitment that involved an oath. It typically had some symbol or physical sign associated with it, and it involved a witness. God's promise to Abraham was unique in that it was an unconditional covenant that hinged only on God's faithfulness. Abraham didn't have to earn it. He simply had to receive it.

God chooses us not because we are good but because He is good.

There were three elements to the promise God made Abraham. See if you can pick them out in Genesis 12:3.

What are the three things God promised Abraham?

- The Land
- The Blessing
- The Child

Scholars have defined *covenant*—translated from the Hebrew *berith* and the Greek *diatheke*—in various ways, and the context in which the word is used in Scripture will also inform our understanding of its meaning. At its most basic level, a covenant is an oath-bound relationship between two or more parties. In divine covenants, God sovereignly establishes the relationship with His creatures. A divine covenant given after the fall is fundamentally one in which God binds Himself by His own oath to keep His promises.²

📍 Genesis 15 gives a critical illustration of the unconditional nature of this promise. Read Genesis 15:12–21. What was Abraham's part in the making of this covenant?

Doesn't it give you a deep sense of relief to know that when it comes to God's covenants to us, He expects so very little of us? He simply expects us to trust Him!

Before we end our time together today, let's go back to Genesis 12:1–3 and focus on God's promise to Abraham. At the heart of the promise was the answer to Abraham and Sarah's one major problem in life: they could not have a baby. Enter God and His promise that Abraham and Sarah would indeed have a child. Yet despite God's promise to Abraham, no son would be born to this old couple until more than twenty-five years later.

📍 Can you see the disconnect between Abraham and Sarah's reality and what God had promised them? What emotions do you feel as you contemplate this disconnect?

It turns out that your trust in God will usually grow the most in the areas where you feel the most pain.

Let's Make This Personal

📍 What is the most painful place in your life right now? As you think about God's promises *to you*, is there an area in your life where it feels like God's promises don't match up with the events in your life?

Today's Take Home Point

God's goodness is meant to be
received in the midst of your pain, not
proven by the absence of pain.

Final Thought

- 📍 As you consider God's promises to you and your own barren places, what might God be inviting you to in your present painful situation?

Day 2: Leap of Faith

Reading: Genesis 12:1–9

Theme: Following God by faith means stepping out into the unknown.

I was engaged—twice. The first time, I ended the engagement two weeks before the wedding. The second time, I had learned some lessons and was smart enough not to wait as long to call things off. I mention this to say that when someone invites you on a journey for life, it usually takes two to make it happen. First comes the invitation, then comes the response to the invitation.

In both my engagements, I had thought I knew the guys I was thinking about marrying. I knew a lot of facts about them. I knew enough about their character to say yes. Have you ever wondered about cultures that believe in arranged marriages? While it might make the dating process easier, how does one actually commit their life to someone they have never met? I'm sure you have a list of answers and wisdom about marriage for me, but I assure you I'm asking the question rhetorically.

In Genesis 12, that's exactly what happened, though. When God chose Abraham and called him into covenant with Him, Abraham barely knew God. In light of what Abraham knew about God, his response to God is nothing short of amazing.

Let's read Genesis 12:1–9 again. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you something new in the text today. Don't skip the reading simply because you read it yesterday. Take time to soak in God's Word. See what new things God might be pointing out to you through this passage today.

Focus on verse 4, where Abraham's response is neatly summarized. Write down the first half of the verse below:

"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him."

I have the gift of complicating things in my life. For Abraham (formerly known as Abram), it wasn't that complicated. God said it, and Abraham did it. If you don't fully appreciate the leap of faith that Abraham took on that day, check out what the writer of Hebrews says about it.

📍 Read Hebrews 11:8. Write down the second part of the verse. According to God's Word, did Abraham have any idea where God was leading him? What do you think gave him the courage to step out in faith anyway?

📍 Has there ever been a time in your life when you stepped out by faith in obedience to God not knowing where you were going? How did that feel?

It's important to understand why Abraham did what he did. It's easy to assume that he obeyed God in order to receive God's favor, but that's not what God's Word tells us happened. The covenant God made with Abraham was unconditional, meaning that it all depended on God. Abraham's obedience was not a necessary step for him to get the reward of a son. Abraham's obedience was born out of an encounter with God that stirred something so deep and powerful in him that the thought of taking a leap of faith wasn't as scary as you and I imagine it would be.

The apostle Paul summarizes Abraham's story in Romans 4. It's an incredible passage of Scripture that you might want to spend extra time in today.

📍 Read Romans 4:13–25. Underline how many times the words *faith* and *believe* show up in the text. How much did Abraham know about God's faithfulness when he obediently stepped out in faith?

- 📍 What do you think was the tipping point that caused him to take a leap of faith and believe God?

Leaving Haran was not an easy step for Abraham. In fact, it was quite costly for him to move. Review Genesis 12:5 and think about what it cost Abraham to say yes to God. Furthermore, Abraham didn't leave Haran alone—he brought his whole tribe with him. Have you ever considered how your decision to follow the Lord has impacted the people around you?

- 📍 What are some of the reasons people hesitate in saying yes to God? List some of the common excuses people have for not following God's call.

Faith is such a big part of the Christian life that you could even say faith *is* the Christian life. What I've observed in my life is that I often believe in God but lack trust in Him. Intellectually, I agree with all that God says in His Word. Yet there is a canyon a mile wide between my head and my heart. My trust in God must move past my intellect to my emotions and my will. Trusting God is meant to lead me to action and to change.

- 📍 In what area in your life do you struggle to trust God?

God understands that though most of us start our faith journey with unshakable faith, we soon question God and wonder about His promises. It's because God understands our struggle that He gives us His promises to hang on to. God's promises are intended to accompany us on our journey through the desert. God is so committed to growing our trust in Him that, over and over again, He does everything possible to grow our trust in Him.

Even more amazing is the truth that God is faithful to us even when we struggle to believe Him.

Faith is such a big part of the Christian life that you can even say that faith is the Christian life.

Read Psalm 100:5—"For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

📍 What does the psalmist mean when he says that God is faithful? How often is your definition of God's faithfulness based on your understanding of your own faithfulness?

God's faithfulness does not mean our lives will be problem-less. In fact, God makes no apology for how difficult the road will be.

📍 Read Genesis 15:13. What does God promise Abraham will happen to his descendants down the road?

Perhaps fear is one of the biggest reasons many hesitate in saying yes to God. Life with God was never meant to be easy, but the promise we hang on to in our desert places is that God is faithful to us even when life is hard.

Let's be honest: If I were Abraham and Sarah, I would have expected God to fulfill His promise for a son right away. I would have expected to receive the promise of the land not long after giving up my home in Haran. I would have expected at least some immediate gratification. Instead, God invited Abraham into the unknown desert.

It turns out that God's idea of building our trust in Him is different from ours.

Let's Make This Personal

- 📍 What was it about God's invitation *to you* that prompted you to say yes to Jesus? What did you know about God when you said yes to Him? How did your decision affect your family and tribe?
- 📍 Have you ever believed God enough to change? What are the most radical ways your life has changed since accepting the invitation to follow Jesus?
- 📍 Have you ever felt disappointed in God for allowing you to suffer even though He has informed you of the difficulties ahead in desert places? As you deepen your understanding of God's faithfulness, how can you confess to God how you might have misjudged Him and reached wrong conclusions about His goodness to you?

Today's Take Home Point

God longs for far more for us than we do. He knows that as much as we want to see the fulfillment of His promises to us, the biggest gift He can give us is the gift of Himself.

Final Thought

📍 Where in your life right now is God inviting you to make radical changes?

Day 3: Old and New Covenants

Reading: Hebrews 8:6–13 and Jeremiah 31:31–34

Theme: While God's faithfulness to Abraham is seen through the Old Covenant, His faithfulness to us is best seen through Jesus Christ.

I was in my second year of medical school when I got a flip phone that I could use while driving. My dad, who thought he was ahead of his peers, had a phone in his car—as in the phone was actually attached to the console of the car. It was a thing back then. I remember feeling so proud of my new flip phone. I walked around for days thrilled with the new technology sitting in my pocket.

Before you assume I'm one hundred years old, just ask your mom about it. She knows what I'm talking about. Anyway, you can imagine my awe when in 2007 the first iPhone came out. Steve Jobs became an overnight hero, and today we can't imagine a world without portable smartphones.

While my old fancy flip phone and my current amazing iPhone are both phones, one is far better than the other. Today, living without my smartphone isn't an option. It's changed my life completely.

When it comes to God and His promises, there are some things that will never change. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is still faithful. His Word is still true. He still never makes mistakes. He cannot lie. He does not make a promise that He will not keep. His character does not change.

But some things do change with time. Some things are eventually replaced with something better. I'm talking about God's covenant here. Think of that first covenant like the original version of the iPhone. Throughout the Old Testament, we learn about several newer versions of God's covenant to His people. There was the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (Deut. 11) and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:8–16). But best of all was the covenant given to us in Jeremiah 31, which affects you and me today: the New Covenant!

So, even though God doesn't change and His promises don't change, some things do become better with time.

When it comes to God's covenant to His people, the best news in the world is that even though Abraham was given that first covenant, which changed his life, God has something

even better for us. We miss God's blessing if we limit our understanding of God's faithfulness to the story of Abraham. Though God's promise to Abraham was nothing short of amazing, we need more than the promise of an Isaac to hang our faith hat on. If we're going to make it through the desert today, we need a New Covenant. We need Jesus.

We're going to spend some time getting a little more familiar with the New Covenant. But first, let's make the connection between God's promise to Abraham and His promises to us today.

📍 Read Galatians 3:13–15. Who is the link between the Old and the New Covenants?

📍 Read Hebrews 8:6–13. According to God's Word, which covenant is better, the Old or the New? Why?

📍 What did God do to the Old Covenant once the New came about?

Do you know anyone who still has a flip phone? Even my father, before he died, got rid of his first-generation phone and bought himself a beautiful iPhone. He didn't need his old car phone anymore. There was a new and improved phone for him to use. The same applies to God's promises to us. God's faithfulness continued well past the story of Abraham. While

God fulfilled all His promises to Abraham, He also used Abraham and Abraham's descendants as the means through which God's Son, Jesus, would someday be born into this world. It is through Jesus that God's goodness extends to us too.

Today, you and I can hang on to Jesus in our desert places. He is the one we've been promised who will get us through the badlands.

Hebrews 8:6–13 refers to one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. We will spend more time studying Jeremiah 31 in week 3 of this study, but let's get acquainted with it right now.

📍 Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. Underline and count how many times God uses the phrase *I will* in these verses. Who can you conclude is responsible in making and keeping this New Covenant?

📍 What are some of the blessings of the New Covenant based on Jeremiah 31:31–34?

So many of us are disappointed in God because we believe He hasn't given us the things that we want and think we need. I've made that mistake before. I've assumed that God's faithfulness to me is proven by His willingness to give me the things I deeply desire—for a while, it was a husband and kids, then it was a successful ministry, and now I long for a secure and comfortable life.

As long as we build our belief in God's goodness on what we want instead of what He has actually promised, we will inevitably be disappointed. God's faithfulness is not defined by

God doing what I want Him to do. Rather, God's faithfulness is His trustworthiness based on His ability and willingness to keep His covenant to us. The key is to understand His promises to us and to live in light of them. God's faithfulness is His ability to help us get through our desert places by giving us *Himself*.

The promise God made to Abraham was so much bigger than simply the birth of his son Isaac. It was the promise of the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, through the seed of Abraham. The good news for us today is not simply that God kept His promise to Abraham and gave him a son in his old age, but that God through Abraham gave us Jesus, the mediator of an even better covenant!

Extra Credit

Let's take a moment and compare the Old and the New Covenants. The more familiar we become with God's promises for us, the stronger our trust in God's goodness and faithfulness will be!³

Old Covenant	New Covenant
Earthly (Heb. 9:1)	Heavenly (Heb. 8:1)
Copy and shadow pointing to the work of Christ (Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1)	Real (Heb. 9:24) and true (Heb. 8:2; 10:1)
Featured human priests who were destined to die	Possesses a high priest who lives forever (Heb. 7:28)
Priest had to offer sacrifices for his own sins (Heb. 9:7)	Jesus' sinlessness meant that He did not offer sacrifice for Himself (Heb. 9:14)
Multiple priests had to enter the sanctuary repeatedly to offer numerous sacrifices (Heb. 9:6-7; 10:11)	A single high priest, Jesus, entered the heavenly sanctuary once (through His death and resurrection) and offered a singular sacrifice once and for all time (Heb. 9:12, 26; 10:10, 12)

Contained the sacrificial blood of animals (Heb. 9:18-22)	Jesus offered His own blood (Heb. 9:12, 26)
The worshipper could not be perfected (Heb. 9:9)	A process of moral transformation enacted that completely purifies (Heb. 9:14; 10:14)
The people were brought to God only symbolically	People can <i>actually</i> approach God with boldness and without fear (Heb. 4:16; 10:19)
Written on tablets of stone (2 Cor. 3:3)	Written by the Spirit on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10)
Brings condemnation since the law cannot be kept (2 Cor. 3:9)	Brings righteousness and life through Christ, who fulfilled the law's requirements (2 Cor. 3:9; Rom. 7:24-25; Rom. 8:1)
Fading, temporary glory (2 Cor. 3:11)	Lasting, permanent glory (2 Cor. 3:11)
In spite of all God's works, His people did not know His ways (Heb. 3:8-10)	All God's people will know God personally (Heb. 8:11)
"I will be their God, and they shall be my people" is at the heart of the Old Covenant (Heb. 8:10)	"I will be their God, and they shall be my people" is at the heart of the New Covenant as well (Heb. 8:10)

Take a look at all you've been promised in Christ. It's pretty incredible, right? The more grounded we stay in God's promises to us, the deeper our joy will be. The more familiar we become with God's promises to us, the greater our confidence in Him will be.

Remember that the Bible is the story of God and His faithfulness to His people despite their unfaithfulness to Him. The more we review that story, the stronger our hope will be.

📍 Though it's only our third day going through homework, we've already learned so much. Take a moment to write down your favorite verse from today's lesson.

Speaking of smartphones, you might even make that verse your wallpaper for the day. In an age of unprecedented distractions, we need to fix our minds on the truth of God's Word and the reality of His abiding presence with us in order to make it through our desert places.

Let's Make This Personal

- 📍 How has your idea of God's faithfulness been impacted by your unanswered prayers and past disappointments?

- 📍 How does understanding that Jesus is our hope remove any sense of disappointment in unfulfilled dreams?

Today's Take Home Point

The biggest mistake we make in Christianity is to make ourselves the center of our story. Jesus is the answer to all of our hopes and dreams. When we have Him, we have everything.

Final Thought

- 📍 As you consider the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant, what new idea or promise is God inviting you to embrace?

Day 4: Sacred Places

Reading: Genesis 12

Theme: The more you're willing to step out in faith based on God's promises, the more of God's faithfulness you will experience.

There are some locations in life that stand out like no other.

The first place where I encountered God deeply was in northern Wisconsin, smack-dab in the middle of nowhere. I was sixteen and had moved from Beirut, Lebanon, to Green Bay, Wisconsin, a year earlier. I went to a Christian camp for two weeks. That's when my life changed.

I don't remember what the pastor spoke about that night, but I remember having a keen awareness of God's nearness and presence. I stood outside the chapel under the glittering Wisconsin night and sensed God calling me to Himself. Though I'd accepted Jesus a few years earlier, that night at camp changed my life. It was the first time I truly experienced God and started to understand His love for me more personally. I committed my life to Him that night. I resolved that He would become the first and most important thing in my life.

That location became a sacred place for me. It felt as if, in that moment of divine awareness, an altar was raised in my heart. I freely offered my life as a living sacrifice to God that day. The desire to experience God intimately has remained my deepest longing.

If you had told me on that night how challenging life with Jesus would be, I might not have believed you. I couldn't have predicted the seasons of pain and disillusionment that would follow. I never would have imagined that the desert would become such a normal part of my Christian life. The only thing I knew for certain on that night was that God loved me unconditionally and had called me to Himself.

I had decided to follow Jesus—no turning back, no turning back.

📍 Have you ever had a deep spiritual encounter with God? Take a moment and describe your sacred place here.

Today's lesson will focus on the importance of sacred places in our relationship with God. For you, perhaps that sacred place is the quiet of the early morning while your kids are still sleeping. Or maybe your sacred space is your commute to work. Or perhaps your sacred space has yet to be created. God has a way of meeting us where we least expect Him to. He speaks in ways we cannot predict or imagine. Those places where we encounter God deeply become sacred spaces in our hearts.

Read Genesis 12 again. Let's dig deeper and ask the Lord to reveal some things today that we may have glossed over in the last days of homework.

📍 How old was Abraham when he left his home in Haran?

📍 Where did God tell Abraham to go?

📍 Who did Abraham take with him?

📍 What was the main problem facing Abraham and Sarah in those days?

Go back and check that biblical map showing Abraham's trek from Haran to Shechem. Do you know much about that journey? Let's find out about it together.

Distance between Haran and Canaan: 400 miles

Topography: desert

Distance between Shechem and Bethel: 20 miles

Distance between Bethel and Egypt: 225 miles

📍 What do you think might have gone through Abraham's mind as he made his way across 400 miles of desert trying to track God's promises? What emotions do you think might have filled his heart?

📍 Have you ever been asked by God to follow Him somewhere without clear directions? What emotions filled you during those days?

Something miraculous had happened to Abraham. Something significant had propelled him to move from the comfort of home to a strange land. Something massive enough had occurred to convince Abraham and his family to leave everything they knew and follow this God they had just met.

📍 What do you think might have been the reason Abraham was willing to move from the comfort of home to the unknown future?

Take a look at these verses and note repetitive words and concepts:

Genesis 12:1—“Now the LORD said to Abram”

Genesis 12:4—“as the LORD had told him”

Genesis 12:7—“Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said”

📍 Can you identify the miracle that had taken place in Abraham’s life in Genesis 12?

📍 When was the last time you heard God speak to you clearly and unequivocally? How close to miraculous do you believe this is?

Sometimes I get caught up in theological debates about God’s voice. Most Christians recognize that God speaks to His people through His Word, the Bible. But there are differing opinions on whether God speaks to us audibly. No matter where you stand on this debate, the most awe-inspiring and amazing reality I have ever encountered is that God speaks to us at all. Imagine how life would look like without any communication from the Almighty. Imagine what kind of relationship we would have with God if He didn’t speak to us.

We serve a God who speaks! On the first pages of Genesis, God speaks the world into existence. After breathing man into being, God speaks to him and gives instructions for life and marriage. After Adam and Eve’s fall, God finds them and speaks to them with a piercing question. The first thing God does when He calls Abraham to Himself is to speak to him.

- 📍 If you're feeling frustrated because you've never heard God audibly speak to you, take heart. You need to better understand how God speaks. For each of these verses, write down how God communicates with us today.

Hebrews 1:1–3

Romans 10:17

2 Timothy 3:16–17

Hebrews 4:12

John 10:27–28

The miraculous, awesome reality is that we serve a God who speaks to His people through His Holy Scriptures. It was God's words to Abraham that turned Abraham's life upside down. It was God's Word that turned my life upside down too. However, there are seasons in my life when it becomes harder for me to hear God's voice.

- 📍 Do you ever struggle to hear God's voice too?

- 📍 What are some of the most common reasons it might be hard for you to hear God's voice?

- 📍 Read Genesis 12:7. This is the second time that God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12. What did God tell Abraham in Genesis 12:7?

It seems as if the more Abraham pursued God, the more he heard from God. It was after Abraham stepped out in faith that God revealed more of His promise to Abraham. Initially, God had told Abraham simply to go. Now, God tells Abraham exactly where the Promised Land is. Sometimes we wait for God to tell us the details of His plans for us when all He's asking is for us to trust Him with what He's told us so far. *As we learn to step out by faith on God's promises, He reveals more of His plans to us.*

We're finally getting to sacred places! The miracle of God speaking was not lost on Abraham. Abraham was so moved by the intimacy of his relationship with God and the reality of God's voice in his life that he built an altar to God right there at the oak of Moreh, where God had clearly spoken to him. This was not the only altar Abraham would build to God. In fact, altar building became something Abraham did regularly. Abraham learned to celebrate God by building altars for Him. Each altar Abraham built was a chance to celebrate the faithfulness of God to him.

I love Oswald Chambers's commentary on Genesis 12:8 from *My Utmost for His Highest*:

Bethel is the symbol of communion with God; Ai is the symbol of the world. Abraham pitched his tent between the two. The measure of the worth of our public activity for God is the private profound communion we have with Him. Rush is wrong every time; there is always plenty of time to worship God. Quiet days with God may be a snare. We have to pitch our tents where we shall always have quiet times with God, however noisy our times with the world may be. There are not three stages in spiritual life—worship, waiting and work. Some of us go in jumps like spiritual frogs, we jump from worship to waiting, and from waiting to work. God's idea is that the three should go

together. They were always together in the life of Our Lord. He was unhesitating and unrelenting. It is a discipline, we cannot get into it all at once.⁴

For Abraham, building altars became symbolic of his deepening experience with God.

While the Old Testament building of an altar became symbolic for commemorating an encounter with God and a place for offering sacrifices for sins, in the New Testament, God gave us an even better way to worship through Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we no longer have to build altars to commemorate our encounters with God, because Jesus makes our heart His home.

📍 Read 1 Corinthians 6:19. What do you learn about sacred places here? In what sacred place does God's Spirit abide since the advent of Jesus?

📍 Read Romans 12:1. Based on this verse, how does the New Testament believer offer an altar of worship unto God?

Let's Make This Personal

📍 What are some of the sacred places where you have encountered God?

📍 What are some ways you can make yourself a living sacrifice to God?

📍 As you think about all God has done and said to you in this season in your life, what are some of the things you can celebrate on the altar of worship to God?

Today's Take Home Point

A life of consecration to God begins in our hearts as we wake up to God's presence, His faithfulness, and His promises.

Final Thought

📍 Oswald Chambers powerfully wrote that worship is giving God the best that He has given you. What might God be inviting you to give to Him today?

Day 5: Famine in the Land

Reading: Genesis 12:10–20

Theme: It is God's faithfulness in the famine that rescues us from more pain.

I'm a Peloton fanatic. I won't bore you with the details, but I am attracted to the tougher bike rides on the Peloton app. I like interval training and high-intensity training. It's supposed to make me stronger, and I can tell by how I feel today compared to a few years before I got on that bike that I am indeed stronger.

Here's one thing I've learned after hundreds of Peloton rides: I've never started a ride that I didn't question midway through. It's true. I choose rides that I know will make me stronger and that I am convinced are good for me, but halfway through, as I huff and puff and sweat my body weight off, I question why I got on that bike to begin with.

What makes Peloton a great exercise program is that the teachers are fully aware of my problem. They know my tendency to want to quit. They understand exactly what it will take to make me into the kind of athlete they know I can be. So, midway through the bike ride, I hear the same reminders echo through the speaker:

"If you're wondering why you got on the bike today, you're doing it right!"

"If you're asking yourself why you're doing this, it's because you want to get stronger."

"Don't quit. It's supposed to be this hard. If you think this is tough, you are tougher."

I'm not trying to sell you an exercise program here, but I am trying to make a point. Now that we've laid the foundation for our study, today we start digging into the desert places. Most of us intuitively understand that difficult seasons are for our eventual good. Deep down, we know that it's the hard road that makes us stronger. Easy is for toddlers. If you want to grow in your walk with Christ and into full maturity, the road needs to get harder. And in order for your faith to stand strong, you're going to have to learn to walk through desert places without quitting.

While I intellectually understand these principles, I've found that I often prefer to be coddled. I want a God who will help me feel good and who will keep the road easy and flat. I resist the hills and somehow imagine that my life ought to be the exception to the rule of life.

Perhaps Abraham fell for that same wishful thinking. If he did, he wouldn't be the first or the last person to struggle with his faith in the midst of an unexpected desert. In today's

reading, we're going to study how Abraham reacted to a famine in the land. While Abraham opted for an easy way out, it was God's faithfulness to Abraham that saved the day.

📍 Read Genesis 12:10–20. How did Abraham respond to the famine that hit the land?

📍 What surprises you about Abraham's response?

📍 Does his reaction to the famine seem consistent with his response to God's call earlier in Genesis 12?

Up until this point, we've witnessed Abraham responding to God's voice in his life. When God called, Abraham followed. Where God pointed, Abraham went. This time, though, when famine hits, Abraham moved with no clear directive from God. He made the 225-mile journey from Bethel to Egypt hoping to find food in his desert place. He made the 225-mile journey to Egypt because he was afraid.

📍 What do you think went through Abraham's head as he made his way toward Egypt?

Egypt is the biblical symbol of worldliness and bondage for the people of Israel. In week 2 of our study, we will study the people of Israel being freed from the bondage of Egypt, a place that becomes associated with sin and death. Yet it is in Egypt where Abraham begins to more fully understand God's faithfulness to him.

Let's dig deeper into the story.

📍 Summarize the events that transpired in Genesis 12:10–20.

📍 What was Abraham's harebrained plan to find food in the famine?

📍 What would you have done if you were in Abraham's shoes?

📍 What was God's response to Abraham's lapse in judgment?

📍 Does God's response surprise you? Why or why not?

📍 Our decisions always impact the people around us. How do you think the Egypt episode affected Lot the nephew of Abraham? (See Genesis 13 and 19 for more about Lot.)

It's amazing when you think about it. Abraham initially stepped out with a giant leap of faith in God, yet just a few verses into his story, he is paralyzed with fear. The same man who had erected two altars of consecration to God now finds himself running to Egypt for help.

Have you ever wondered why God didn't stop Abraham? Have you ever wondered why Abraham didn't ask God for more direction? The truth is that we've all been there before. The longer I live as a follower of Jesus, the more grateful I am for the story of Abraham's reaction to the famine in the land.

I'm beginning to see that the story of Abraham's faithlessness tells us more about God's goodness than it does Abraham's weakness. It is God's desire to reveal His faithfulness to us, and there is no better place for God to reveal His faithfulness than in the places of our fear. There is no better place for us to stand secure in God's faithfulness than when we've been rescued by God in the places of our failure.

In other words, *the best place for God to reveal His love for us is in the place we least deserve it.*

After my mountaintop experience with God in northern Wisconsin, things went smoothly for a season. But it didn't take long for famine to come. I wish I could tell you that I had learned from Abraham and turned to God in my desert places. But like Abraham before me, I turned to Egypt in my fear. I looked for ways to satisfy my own hunger in the areas of my need. Like

Abraham before me, I let go of all the promises that God had so generously provided for me to rest in. I overestimated my need to provide for myself and underestimated the depth of God's faithfulness to me.

At the end of the day, I suppose I didn't really understand God's faithfulness yet. Some days, I still don't. But there is one thing I've learned for sure: we will never experience the faithfulness of God as we will in our seasons of famine. It's in the desert places of our lives where God's promises sustain us the most. It turns out that the desert places are just as sacred to God as the places where we have built our altars of worship to Him.

Let's Make This Personal

- 📍 What kind of famine have you faced in your life?

- 📍 Where have you looked for help in famine? How many of your reactions were rooted in fear?

- 📍 How does God's faithfulness to Abraham affect your response to Him in your areas of failure and famine?

Today's Take Home Point

The best place for God to reveal His love
for us is in the place we least deserve it.

Final Thought

📍 What is God's invitation to you today as you consider your present places of famine?

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Praying through Scripture—Week 1

Into the Unknown

Genesis 12:4–9

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Read the passage out loud once.

Now close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Pray with me: "O God, I pray that You will help me to hear You speak during this time of meditation on Your Word. I open my hands to You. I open my ears to You."

Pause for eight to ten seconds.

Imagine yourself in Abraham's shoes. You've been told by God to move, but you're not sure where to go. You call for a family meeting and inform your loved ones that you intend to follow God. They ask you where you're going. You answer honestly that you're not sure. You invite them to come with you.

How do you think they respond? What do you tell them to convince them to go with you?

What was it about your encounter with God that turned everything upside down? Why can't you just go about living your life as usual? What questions do you have for God?

Read the passage again.

Pause for five to eight seconds.

Imagine with me that you've packed everything up and you've started the journey. It's hot, and you're thirsty. You're not 100 percent sure which direction to go. You say a silent prayer and take the next step. Your knees hurt a bit, but you're on the go now. There's no turning back.

What are your fears? What are your frustrations? Where is God in your imagination now? What do you hang on to as the sun sets on that first day of travel? What questions are you having to answer from the people on the journey with you? What are your last thoughts as you drift into sleep?

Pause five to eight seconds.

One day, you find a big oak along the way. You camp out for the night. That night, God appears to you again. What goes through your mind? How does His presence affect you? How do you feel about your life the next morning? Why do you build an altar to God that next morning?

God's manifest presence reminds us that we are not alone. No matter how deep our questions in life are, all it takes for us to find hope again is a fresh word from God. What if we understood from this story that God's voice is loudest in our life when we need it the most? What if we associated our deepest, darkest nights with the ideal place for God to speak?

Now close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. In what area in your life do you have questions about your future? Where in your life do you long for clear direction from God? If you're unsure of what next step to take, spend some time jotting down what God has promised you so far. Ask God to give you the courage to take the next step and the direction you're to go.