

Simple Sundays

**What is
a Covenant?**



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Main Idea

God initiates a covenant with us, setting the example for all of our relationships.

You Will Need

Bibles, newsprint, markers, paper, pens

Faith Statement

In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth.

—A Brief Statement of Faith

Background

A *covenant* is a pact, an agreement, or a contract. From the faith perspective, a covenant is a relationship. In marriage, a couple defines their relationship by making vows to each other and promising commitment of a lifelong love. The covenant that sets the example for all other covenants is the one God makes with Abraham. The most ancient form of this covenant can be seen in the Scripture study for this session.

The covenant was not a neat, clean, written document, but a symbolic ritual. God told Abraham to bring a three-year-old cow, a three-year-old goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Each of these animals was cut in half and separated, and laid down with a path running between the two halves. The next thing Abraham had to do was chase away the birds of prey that came down to feast on the freshly killed animals. Here stood Abraham, aware that a covenant was about to be made, for this was the custom of his time. Each person walked between an animal that was cut in half to seal a covenant between them. The implication was that the individuals walking through this animal would incur the same fate of being torn in two should they fail to live up to their side of the agreement. The symbolic power of this formal action is of monumental importance to Abraham.

As the ritual begins, the sun begins to set, and Abraham falls into a deep sleep. Abraham sees a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, the graphic symbol for God, pass along the path. God chooses to be placed under obligation in this covenant.

How amazing! God initiates the covenant. Abraham (almost asleep, not walking the path himself) receives the covenant. God promises Abraham descendants and land, and in return, Abraham responds by placing himself in agreement with God's plan for the future. And the result of this covenant is a relationship to which God is committed not only to Abraham but also to us.

You and Your Youth

This session focuses on the original covenant God made with Abraham. Your youth will probably not be familiar with the ritual that is described, but it is probably one they will never forget. It shows graphically that the covenant was initiated by God and that Abraham simply received. This story of the covenant confirms our own starting point in the Reformed faith, the belief that God has chosen to come to us in love. We can respond as did Abraham, with childlike trust, simply beginning to grow in our relationship with God. Begin your preparations by praying for each youth. Imagine forming a relationship with each one during the course of these five sessions. Imagine strengthening your own relationship with God. The time you will spend leading the youth through this session may deepen your understanding of covenant.



Enter

Learn names, encourage interaction, and laugh together as the session begins.

Name Game

Chairs

Gather in a circle in chairs, except for one person who stands in the middle. The person in the middle is to begin a sentence with "My name is . . . and I have never . . ." (For example, My name is Karen and I have never been to Texas; eaten catfish; been here before.) Anyone who has done the thing named must get up and find a seat that's vacant. The person in the middle will also look for an empty seat, leaving one person standing in the middle to begin the game again.

Introduce Covenants

In today's Bible story, Abraham and Sarah have never made a covenant like the one they are asked to make with God. Discuss covenants by using the following discussion starters:

- Have you ever made an agreement with a parent?
- Did you keep it? Did your parent? How did it work?
- Have you ever made a pact with a friend?
- What were the terms of the pact? Did it work?
- Have you ever signed a contract?
- What was it for? What did it cost you?

Opening Prayer

Dear God, we want to learn about your covenant with Abraham. Help us as we read to understand and be open to the meaning this story can have in our lives. Amen.



Explore

Study the Bible

Bibles, newsprint

Following the Use-All-Your Senses Bible study method, choose the following roles: God, Abraham, and Sarah. Read Genesis 15:7–12, 17–18, and be especially aware of your senses as you hear the story: What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel as your character?

On newsprint describe the sensory experiences you had while the story was read, beginning each sentence with a phrase such as: I heard . . . / I saw . . . / I smelled . . . / I tasted . . . / I felt Ask:

- What does this mean for your character?

Read the story again. Comment on the story, beginning each sentence with a phrase such as: I thought . . . / I believed . . . / I understood . . .

Answer these follow-up questions:

- Whose idea was the covenant?
- Why were the animals cut in two?
- Who walked between the animals?
- Why did only God walk between the animals?
- What two things does God promise?
- How would you describe the relationship between God and Abraham?

Examine Relationships

God initiates a covenant with Abraham because God wants to be in relationship with him. At the heart of life is the desire to be in relationship, and God says that our lives are at their best when we are in relationship with God and with one another. Explore relationships by using all your senses to describe what good relationships would be like. Write the descriptions on newsprint.

Use your senses to describe a good relationship with God. What would you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel? What would you think, believe, and understand?

Use your senses to describe a good relationship with a best friend. What would you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel? What would you think, believe, and understand?

Work in smaller groups and think about one particular relationship and then report back to the group.



Express

These discussions are an opportunity to apply the Scripture to our lives. If the youth do not seem to relate to these situations, then modify them to make them relevant.

Youth Issue

You are in the midst of a relationship that you would describe as great. It feels better than any relationship you have ever had, and in fact, you even use the word love to describe it. But you're not sure that you would describe it as a covenant, because you haven't made any real commitments. What's the difference between feeling in love and making a covenant? Do you make preliminary covenants or partial covenants when you care deeply about someone? What commitments do you make in being friends with someone else?

Action Steps

Slips of paper

It's one thing to define a good relationship with God and a good relationship with a friend, it's another to put those good definitions into action? Decide right now what would be the most helpful thing you could do to improve your relationship with God and your relationship with a friend. Write your commitment on a slip of paper and put it in your pocket to pull out during the week to remind yourself of your relationships and how important your actions are.



Exit

Closing Prayer

Close with intercessory imagining prayer. Take a few moments to become quiet and centered. Close your eyes and remember the commitment you have made to improve your relationship with a particular friend. Visualize this person, imagining this person in your mind's eye as concretely as possible. Hold the picture in your mind.

Next visualize the presence of Christ as light—a halo or blanket of light that comes on the person you are visualizing—surrounding and suffusing that person with the light of Christ. Hold this visual image in your mind and let it be your prayer. When finished, say aloud, "Amen."