

## 6

## GOD MAKES A COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

### *God Binds Himself to People in a Covenant*

Genesis 15

The word **covenant** shows up many times in the Bible, and in many places. A covenant is an agreement that binds two persons or two groups of people together in a special relationship that they don't have with others. One of the most

*"I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them." Jeremiah 32:40a*



common examples of a covenant is marriage. When a man and a woman marry, they make promises to each other. They promise that they will love each other and stay married always, no matter what. They promise to love each other with a love that is different from the love they have for anyone else. Their marriage covenant gives them a special relationship to each other that no else has with them.

A marriage covenant is a wonderful thing. But even better is the covenant God makes with people. God had planned, before he ever made anyone, that he would have people for himself who would be his people. He would have a special relationship with them that he wouldn't have with other people. He would enter into a covenant with them.

**The Bible is the story of God making and keeping that covenant with his people.** Very early in the Bible's story we find the stories of Abraham, to whom God promised land, children, and blessing. God told Abraham he was making a covenant with him and with his children after him. God would be the God of the nation that would come from Abraham. His relationship with them would be different from the relationships he had with all the other nations.

One night God appeared to Abraham

in a vision, and Abraham told God about a worry that he had. God had promised that Abraham's descendants would become a great nation and possess the land in which Abraham now was living only as a guest, in tents. But in order to have descendants, Abraham needed to have at least one child. He had none, and he was getting old. "You've given me no children," Abraham told God. "My servant will inherit everything when I'm gone, because there isn't anyone else."

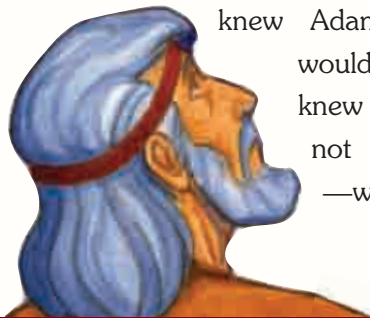
"No," God told him, "your own son will inherit all you have." Then God told Abraham to step outside and look up at the night sky. Abraham did not live near a brightly lit city. He had no streetlights, such as you probably have in your neighborhood. He stepped out into great darkness, and when he looked up, he saw countless billions of stars. "Count the stars," God told him, "if you can. That's what your descendants will be like." Then God promised Abraham again, "I will give you this land to possess."

"How am I to know I will possess it?" Abraham asked, and God did something very gracious to encourage Abraham's faith. He went through the ceremony that people would go through when they made covenants with each other. God did this to show Abraham that he really was making

a covenant with him and he really would keep his promises.

God told Abraham to kill several animals: a cow, a goat, a sheep, and two birds. Abraham was to cut the animals in half and make a sort of pathway, by placing one half of each animal and one bird on one side, and the other halves and the other bird on the other side. When people in those days made covenants with each other, they would walk between pieces of cut up animals like these. It was as if they were saying, “Let what happened to these animals happen to me if I don’t keep my promises in this covenant.” After Abraham had laid out the pieces as God had said, he fell into a deep sleep. In his sleep, he saw a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch—symbols for the invisible God—pass between the animal pieces. Only God passed between the pieces. Abraham did not; he slept.

Back when God first planned to have a covenant people for himself, he knew Adam and Eve would sin, and he knew his people—  
 not yet created  
 —would be sin-



ners. They would never be able to perfectly keep the promises of a covenant on their own. **So God determined that *he* would do everything needed to be sure the covenant would be kept on both sides.** He would keep the promises for his own side of the covenant, and he would provide the way for his people’s side of the covenant to be kept as well.

## AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE...

- ▶ **Be sure your children realize that God is the one speaking in the key verse. Ask your children, what does he promise to do, and what does he promise not to do? How long will this covenant last? You may want to look up the verse and read its context as well.**
- ▶ **Explain to your children that now that Jesus has come, God’s covenant is not just with Israelites—physical descendants of Abraham—but with all who trust in Christ to keep the requirements of the covenant for them.**

# GOD'S PEOPLE WORSHIP A GOLDEN CALF

*God Provides a Mediator for His People*

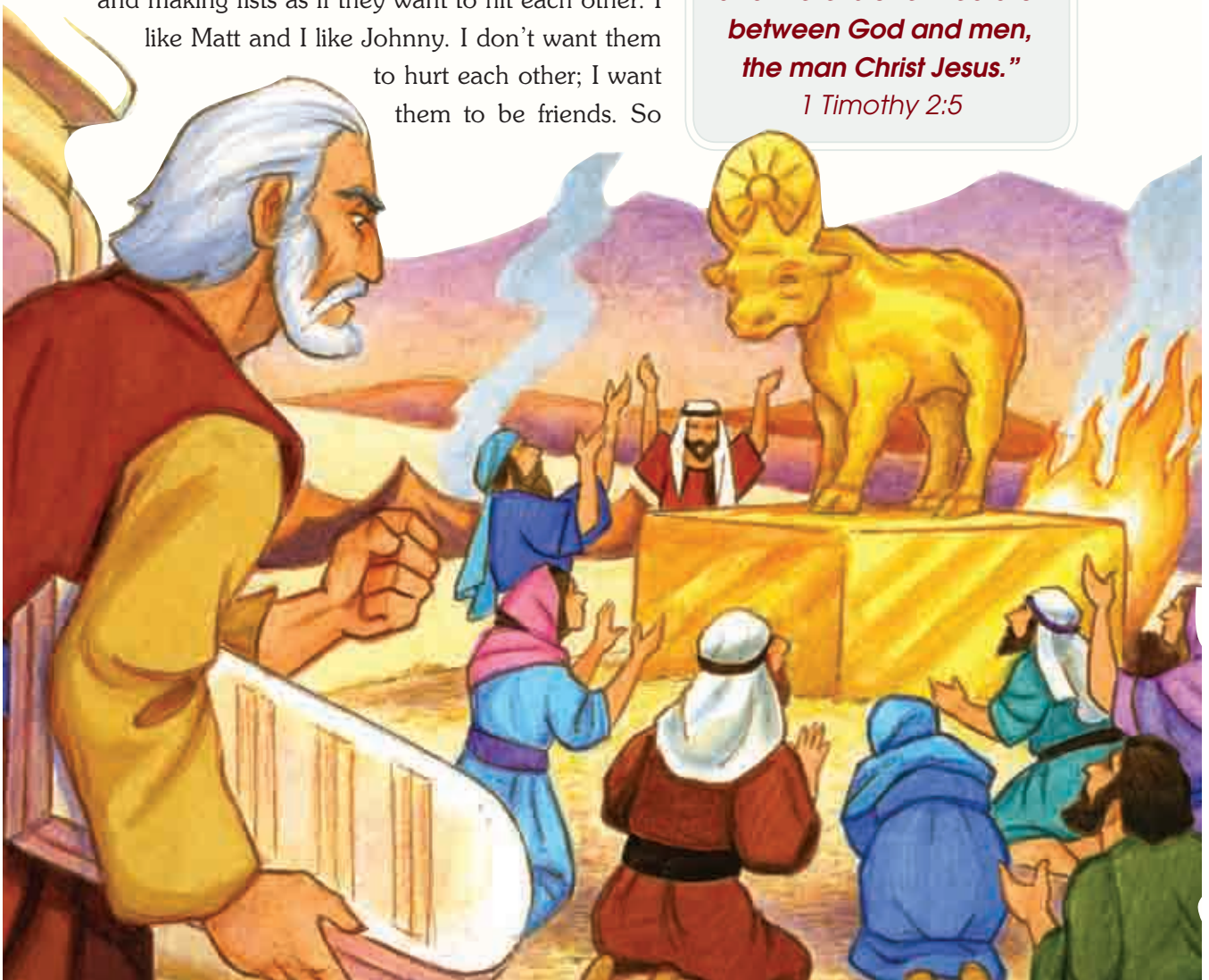
Exodus 32–34

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**J**ohnny and Matt are mad at each other. They are so mad that they're yelling and making fists as if they want to hit each other. I like Matt and I like Johnny. I don't want them to hurt each other; I want them to be friends. So

***"For there is one God,  
and there is one mediator  
between God and men,  
the man Christ Jesus."***

*1 Timothy 2:5*



I step right between them, to keep them from hitting each other, and I help them work out their problem so that they will both be happy with the solution. That is what a **mediator** is—someone who gets between two enemies and makes peace between them. Moses had to be a mediator between God and the Israelites, because while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving God’s laws from him, the Israelites grew tired of waiting for Moses. After all, he had been gone for forty days. Who knew what had happened to him? Maybe all that smoke and lightning had killed him. Maybe he wasn’t going to come back to tell them what God was like.

So the Israelites made up a new god, one they could see and touch, one that would not be so scary to them. They took gold and melted it down and reshaped it into a golden calf. They said this was the god who had brought them out of Egypt and who would take care of them from now on. They bowed down to it and worshiped it.

How do you think God felt about that? He was furious! He told Moses he would destroy the Israelites and start over with some other people. So Moses became a mediator between God and the people. A mediator wants what is best for both of

the enemies he tries to reconcile. Moses wanted God to receive the glory he should get because of his greatness. He told God that if God destroyed the Israelites, all the other nations would think that God didn’t keep his promises. They would think that he was not able to give his people the Promised Land. God listened to Moses and did not destroy the Israelites.

When Moses went down the mountain and saw the people worshiping the golden calf, he grew furious, as God had been. He broke the idol into pieces, burned the pieces, mixed the ashes with water, and made the Israelites drink it. He had some of the people who had remained faithful to God go through the camp, killing Israelites who had worshiped the calf. On God’s behalf, Moses the mediator showed the Israelites how angry God was at their sin. Then Moses went back up on the mountain to pray for them. God had said that he would not destroy the Israelites, but he also said he would not go with them to the Promised Land. A mediator wants what is best for both of the enemies he tries to reconcile. Moses knew that what was best for the Israelites was to have God with them. He prayed for God to go with the Israelites and God said he would go.

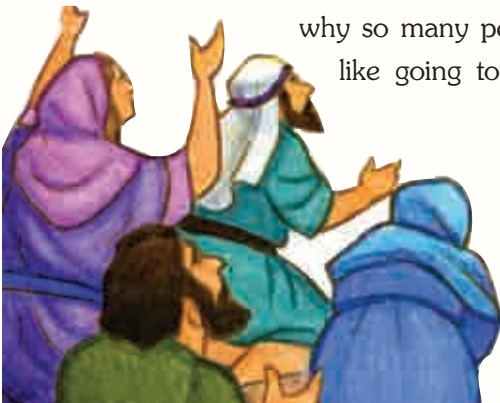
Moses succeeded somewhat as a medi-

ator between God and the Israelites. But he could not make lasting peace between God and people. For that, people would have to wait for Jesus to come. There are two big reasons why God and people are not friends, but enemies. The first reason is that God is angry at people's sin. God is holy. That means that he never sins and he hates all sin. A mediator would need to get rid of God's anger at sin. Jesus did that. When he died on the cross, he took all God's anger at his people's sin and was punished for it in their place. God has no anger left for the person who has trusted in Jesus. The other reason that God and people are not friends, but enemies, is because people are angry with God. God made people to love him, but when sin came into the world, people stopped loving God and began hating him and rebelling against him. That is why so many people don't like going to church or

hearing about God and what he wants us to do. Left to themselves, people do not love God; they hate him. Jesus, the mediator, changes the hearts of his people so they will love God and want to please him.

## AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE...

- ▶ How do people today—sometimes even God's people—choose idols over the true God? (False ideas about God can be idols.)
- ▶ What do people do that shows their natural hatred and rebellion toward God?
- ▶ To reinforce an understanding of “mediator,” ask children for examples of friends or family members who have acted as mediators between people who were angry at each other.
- ▶ Thank Jesus for his amazing love that caused him to take God's anger in his people's place, and for his amazing power that can change angry, rebellious hearts to hearts that love God.



# JESUS WASHES HIS DISCIPLES' FEET

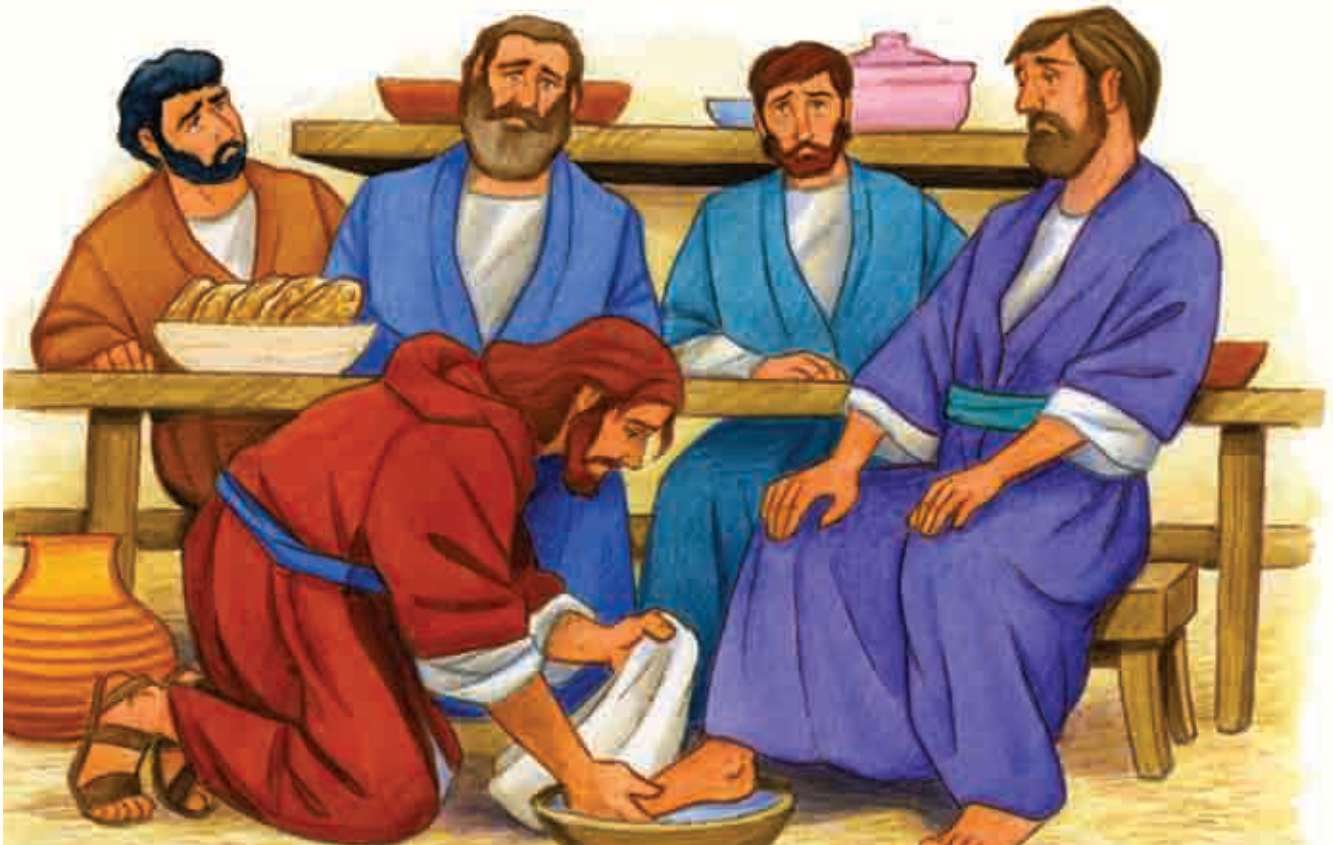
*Jesus Humbles Himself to Serve His People*

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John 13:1–17

Every one of the disciples felt a boost in his spirits as they all filed up the stairs and through the doorway of the upper room. They sniffed with appreciation the aroma of roast lamb that met them at the door. When the men saw the table, spread with all they would need for this annual Passover meal, more than one stomach growled. What a relief to have this

*“[Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” Philippians 2:6–7*



evening alone together! The last few days in busy Jerusalem had been packed with crowds and stress. The disciples dropped onto the couches at the table, stretched their legs, and kicked the sandals off their dusty feet.

The happy chatter ceased as first one, then another of the disciples realized what—or who—was missing. Only the twelve of them, and Jesus, were in the room. Where was the servant who would wash their feet so they could eat? Each looked around the room a little more carefully, hoping his first conclusion had been wrong, but no, there was no servant there to make the rounds with the customary pitcher of water, basin, and towel, washing the feet of the guests.

Great! How could they possibly enjoy this eagerly awaited holiday dinner with dirty feet? Each man in the room would have to sit there, with no relief for his dusty feet, weary from walking dirt roads all day in sandals. Not only that, but since each would be in a half-lying position on the couches placed around the table for dining, each would have a neighbor's dirty feet near his face while he

tried to eat. How much could they enjoy a holiday dinner in such circumstances?

Perhaps the disciples shot dark glances at Peter and John, whom Jesus had assigned to prepare this meal. How could they have forgotten such an important preparation as the washing of feet? The happy hearts that had entered the room had all grown cross and gloomy. It didn't occur to a single one of the disciples to offer to take care of the foot washing himself.

Jesus looked around the room at the angry faces of his disciples and loved every one of them. He rose from his seat, removed his outer robe, and wrapped around his waist a towel, large enough to dry many feet. He poured water into a basin and went to the first of the twelve men. Kneeling at his dirty feet, Jesus lifted first one foot and then the other into the basin, washed them clean, and dried them on the towel. Shocked silence filled the room. When he had finished the first man's feet, he went on to the second man, and then the third. No one spoke. The silence of shock that Jesus, their leader, would do such a thing gave way to the silence of shame that



none of them had offered to do it instead. Only Peter protested, but Jesus washed his feet all the same.

When he had finished, Jesus put his own robe back on. “You call me Teacher and Lord,” he told the disciples, “and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”

This is not the only example of Jesus stepping down to the place of a servant. **Jesus is God. All creation belongs to him and exists to serve him. Any creature that rebels deserves to be destroyed on the spot. Yet Jesus stepped down from all the glory and praise of heaven to serve just such rebels.** He who has no limits limited himself to the body of a newborn baby so he could rescue people who refused to serve him. He who possesses all glory went without food and shelter, a willing slave to sinners. And he who had never sinned died the death of a criminal and suffered God’s wrath, so he could save his own killers.

This is why Christians must be servants,

to each other and to those around them who do not yet know God, but who may come to know him. Their Lord and their Teacher was the perfect servant. As he said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

## AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE...

- ▶ Discuss with your children the contrasts between Jesus’ status as God and the status he chose in order to serve. Discuss how what he deserved to have compares with what he was willing to have. Compare that with recent examples in your own family of people holding tightly to their “rights.”
- ▶ Discuss why it is so difficult to serve, to take the lower place, to let someone else “take advantage” of us. Help your children see that, ultimately, sin is at the bottom of all our insistence on our rights and our refusal to be inconvenienced for others.

## A NOTE FOR PARENTS FROM THE AUTHOR

*Mighty Acts of God* gets its name from David's statement to God in Psalm 145:4: "One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts." The book is intended to be one way in which parents, grandparents, and others who love children can declare some of God's mighty acts to the next generation. If we read the entire psalm in which this verse is embedded, we see that David was not interested in telling stories about God's mighty acts for their entertainment value, or even for their usefulness in providing good moral examples. David made this statement about declaring God's mighty acts to the next generation in the context of a psalm that describes the nature of God as being altogether worthy of praise. David wrote of the "unsearchable greatness" of the Lord; he said people would "pour forth the fame of (God's) abundant goodness" and "sing aloud of his righteousness"; he said he himself would meditate on "the glorious splendor of (God's) majesty." In other words, the reason for telling stories of God's mighty acts is to make known the wonder of God's great character. *Mighty Acts of God* is a Bible storybook written with this purpose in mind.

In this storybook, the focus in each story is on God, not on the human characters in the story. The stories are not presented primarily as moral tales giving children role models to emulate, or as accounts of how God always meets people's needs (as do genies in fairy tales!). Instead, the book's goal is for children to rightly see the God of Scripture, as he presents himself in the Bible's narrative accounts. In this way, the book as a whole provides an overview of the character and attributes of God.

Taken together, all the stories we read in Scripture of God's mighty acts relate the story of God's mightiest act: his work of redemption. When Satan's schemes and people's sin seemed sure to thwart his plans, God's purpose never faltered; he continued to perform one mighty act after another, all working together to accomplish the plan of redemption he had devised before he had created anything. From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, we read the record of how God accomplished his purpose of having a people for himself, to whom he would be bound by a covenant of his own making. This covenant

would be a covenant of grace, in which God would do all that was required to secure a people for himself and to be their God. The stories in our Old and New Testaments show the progressive revelation of this covenant and its fulfillment. The Bible's stories are not intended as a random collection giving us pointers on how to behave. The primary purpose of Scripture's narratives is to reveal God to his people as sovereign Ruler, holy Judge, powerful Savior, faithful Redeemer, and gracious covenant God.

*Mighty Acts of God* was written with elementary school-age children in mind. The stories are told in chronological order to demonstrate the unfolding revelation God gave of himself, of his saving purposes, and of his covenant. Important doctrinal teachings of historic Reformed Christianity are introduced or reinforced in these stories. Summary statements of these doctrines appear in the text in colored type to be easily seen. Similarly, words or theological terms that might be unfamiliar to children appear in bold. At the beginning of each story is a key verse—a Bible verse from the story or from elsewhere in Scripture, clearly stating one of the important truths seen in the narrative. A short separate feature called “As for Me and My House” follows each story, providing parents with additional ideas for discussion or activities related to the truths presented in that particular story.

*Mighty Acts of God* is offered with this prayer for you as you read it with the children in your life:

*Let your work be shown to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.*

*Psalm 90:16*

*Starr Meade*

*Mighty Acts of God: A Family Bible Storybook*  
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