

Genesis 17:1- 18:15

GENESIS 17 – GOD REAFFIRMS THE COVENANT

A. An appearance from God, a change of name for Abram.

1. (1-2) God appears to Abram when he is 99 years old.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”

a. **When Abram was ninety-nine years old:** Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4). He was 86 years old when the son Ishmael was born of Hagar, the servant girl (Genesis 16:15-16). He had waited some 25 years for the fulfillment of God’s promise to give a son through Sarai. It had been some 13 years since his last recorded word from God.

d. **Walk before Me and be blameless:** After the proclamation of His name *E/ Shaddai*, God then told Abram what was expected of him. It was first revelation and then expectation. This communicates the principle that we can only do what God expects of us when we know who He is, and we know it in a full, personal, and real way.

i. The word **blameless** literally means “whole.” God wanted *all* of Abram, a total commitment.

e. **I will make My covenant between Me and you:** God also reminded Abram He had not forgotten the covenant. Though it had been some 25 years since the promise was first made, and though it maybe seemed to Abram God forgot, God didn’t forget anything.

i. The last time we are told the LORD communicated with Abram directly was some 13 years before (Genesis 16:15-16). Seemingly, Abram had 13 years of “normal” fellowship with God, waiting for the promise all the time. It would be understandable if, at times during those 13 years, Abram felt that God forgot His promise.

iii. Abram was becoming a great man of faith, but you don’t make a great man of faith overnight. It takes years of God’s work in them, years of almost mundane trusting in God, perhaps interrupted with a few spectacular encounters with the LORD.

2. (3-8) God refers to specific terms of the covenant He has not forgotten.

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

a. **Abram fell on his face:** As this seems to be a direct, personal appearance of God, Abram did the proper and reverent thing; he **fell on his face**, showing submission and giving honor to God.

b. **No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham:** To encourage Abram's faith in the promise of descendants through Sarai, God changed Abram's name from **Abram** (father of many) to **Abraham** (father of many nations).

i. There was, no doubt, a sense in which **Abram**, "father of many," was a hard name to bear for a man who was the father of none, especially in a culture where inquiry about one's personal life was a courteous practice. Now, God went a step further and made his name "father of many nations." It was almost crazy for a childless man to have such a name.

c. **Father of many nations... exceedingly fruitful... make nations of you, and kings shall come from you:** In almost every dimension, God made the long-delayed promise to Abraham *greater*. Never before had God specifically said that *multiple nations* would come from Abraham (a singular *nation* was promised in Genesis 12:2). Never before had God specifically said that **kings** would descend from Abraham.

d. **I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant:** God also specifically promised that the covenant He originally made with Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 would be passed to his chosen **descendants**, those not yet born. The covenant was not only for Abram, but it was **an everlasting covenant**.

e. **I give to you and your descendants after you the land... for an everlasting possession:** The specific promise of **the land** was made *not* only to Abraham, but also to his covenant **descendants**. This **everlasting covenant** was just as valid for them as it was for Abraham himself. **The land** was and is God's covenant promise to the Jewish people.

3. (9-14) God institutes a sign of the covenant for Abraham and his descendants.

And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

a. **This is My covenant which you shall keep:** God introduced the command regarding circumcision with these words. The cutting and removal of the foreskin of every male among Abraham's covenant descendants would mark them as those who were in the covenant. Since this covenant was made with the literal, genetic **descendants** of Abraham through the promise of God, it was appropriate that this sign of the covenant be given to those born into the covenant and was associated with the reproductive part of their body.

>>>> "Circumcision indicated to the seed of Abraham that there was a defilement of the flesh in man which must for ever be taken away, or man would remain impure, and out of covenant with God." (Spurgeon)

b. **Every male child among you shall be circumcised:** For the first time, God gave Abraham something to *do* in regard to the covenant. He told him that his descendants must take upon themselves a **sign of the covenant**, showing they received the covenant by faith.

c. **You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins:** The sign was circumcision, the cutting away of the male foreskin. God chose this sign for many important reasons.

i. Circumcision was not unknown in the world at that time. It was a ritual practiced among various peoples.

ii. There were undoubtedly hygienic reasons, especially making sense in the ancient world. "There is some medical evidence that this practice has indeed contributed to the long-lasting vigor of the Jewish race." (Morris) McMillen, in *None of These Diseases*, noted studies in 1949 and 1954 that showed a remarkably low rate of cervical cancer for Jewish women, because they mostly have husbands who are circumcised.

iii. But more importantly, circumcision is a cutting away of the flesh and an appropriate **sign of the covenant** for those who should put no trust in the flesh.<<<<<<<<

iv. Also, because circumcision deals with the organ of procreation, it was a reminder of the special seed of Abraham, which would ultimately bring the Messiah.<<<<<<<<

d. **He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised:** Since the covenant descendants of Abraham are born into that covenant by their natural birth, it logically followed that the **sign of the covenant** should be given to them in their infancy.

e. **He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised:** God probably commanded the circumcision of children to take place on the eighth day because this is the day when an infant's immune system is at the optimum level for such a procedure.

i. McMillen also notes newborn children have a peculiar susceptibility to bleeding between the second and fifth days of life. It seems an important blood-clotting agent, vitamin K, is not formed in the normal amount until the fifth to seventh day of life. Another blood-clotting agent, prothrombin, is at its highest levels in infants on precisely the eighth day of life, making the eighth day the safest, earliest day to circumcise an infant.

f. **The uncircumcised male child... he has broken My covenant:** Those who rejected circumcision rejected the **sign of the covenant**. They were no friends of the covenant God made with Abraham. **It wasn't that circumcision made them a part of the covenant (faith did), but rejection of circumcision was a rejection of the covenant.**

iii. Again, Paul spoke of circumcision and baptism in [Colossians 2:11-12](#), connecting them without saying they are the same thing. In this sense, at least, they are connected: circumcision did not save a Jewish man, but refusing to be circumcised

meant disobedience to the covenant, and perhaps rejection of it. In the same sense, being baptized does not save us, but no Christian should refuse baptism.

B. The promise of a son to both Abraham and Sarah.

1. (15-16) The promise is stated: a son will come through Sarah, whose name is changed from Sarai.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a *mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall be from her."

a. **As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name:** There is only a subtle difference between **Sarai** and **Sarah**, but it is an important difference. **Sarah** indicates a higher standing and status than **Sarai**.

i. "*Sarai signifies my lady, or my princess, which confines her dominion to one family; but Sarah signifies either a lady or princess, simply and absolutely without restriction, or the princess of a multitude.*" (Poole)

2. (17-18) Abraham's response to the promise.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a *child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a *child*?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

a. **Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed:** Abraham's laugh didn't seem to be one of cynical doubt, but instead of rejoicing in something he knew was impossible by all outward appearance, but that God could perform.

c. **Oh, that Ishmael might live before You:** At the same time, Abraham didn't really understand God's promise completely. He perhaps thought God simply meant Ishmael would be Sarah's spiritual son. Abraham – like all of us – found it hard to trust God for more than what he could conceive of.

3. (19-22) God repeats the promise and names the child who will come forth from Abraham and Sarah.

Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

a. **Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac:** The son will be named **Isaac** (laughter) because he would be such a joy to his parents, but also to always remind Abraham he laughed at God’s promise to give him a son through Sarah at this late age.

b. **As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him:** Ishmael *will* be blessed. God would answer Abraham’s prayer for blessing on Ishmael, making **him fruitful** and to **multiply him exceedingly**. Nevertheless, the covenant and its promises would pass only through the son to come, the son of promise.

4. (23-27) Abraham carries out God’s command of circumcision.

So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. Abraham *was* ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son *was* thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

b. **That very same day Abraham was circumcised:** Abraham’s obedience was *complete* (every male among the men of Abraham’s house), it was *prompt* (that very same day), and it was *daring* (to virtually incapacitate all his [318] fighting men at the same time).

i. Abraham didn’t need to pray about this. He didn’t need to grow or transition into this. God said it, and he did it. This is a wonderful example of obedience from a great man of faith.

GENESIS 18 – THE PROMISE OF ISAAC CONFIRMED

A. Abraham welcomes important visitors.

1. (1-5) Abraham invites the LORD and two others to a meal.

Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." They said, "Do as you have said."

a. **Then the LORD appeared:** Apparently, this happened a short time after the events of Genesis 17. In Genesis 17:21, God said Sarah would give birth one year later, and at this time she was not yet pregnant; so this couldn't be more than three months after the events in Genesis 17.

b. **Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees:** Here again, the LORD came to Abraham in human appearance. This is another presentation of Jesus in human form before His incarnation, here among the **three men** visiting Abraham.

i. We can assume that this was God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, appearing to Abraham before His incarnation and birth at Bethlehem. We assume this because of God the Father it says, *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him* (John 1:18), and no man has ever seen God in the Person of the Father (1 Timothy 6:16). Therefore, if God appeared to someone in human appearance in the Old Testament (and no one has seen God the Father) it makes sense the appearance is of the eternal Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, before His incarnation in Bethlehem.

c. **The terebinth trees of Mamre:** This was a significant place in Abraham's life. Abraham moved to Mamre when he came back into the promised land from Egypt and

built an altar there (Genesis 13:18), and apparently stayed there some time (Genesis 14:13). Abraham purchased a field and cave at **Mamre**, using it for Sarah's burial (Genesis 23:17-19). Abraham himself was buried there (Genesis 25:9), and his son Isaac was also buried there (Genesis 49:30, 50:13).

i. Though the LORD (in the Person of Jesus Christ) appeared to Abraham twice before (Genesis 12:7, 17:1), we don't know if Jesus looked the same each time, or if Abraham simply knew who it was by some sort of intuition or spiritual knowledge.

2. (6-8) Sarah and Abraham prepare a meal for their visitors.

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead *it* and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave *it* to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set *it* before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

a. **Abraham hurried into the tent:** Abraham's urgency seems to go beyond the great sense of hospitality that was common in his time. Abraham understood there was something special about these three visitors.

b. **Abraham ran to the herd:** Though Abraham and Sarah hurried to prepare this meal for their visitors, it still took considerable time to make and serve the food. The sense is that Abraham and Sarah themselves did this work, instead of commanding servants to do it for them.

3. (9-10) God reconfirms His promise of a son.

Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent." And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which *was* behind him.)

a. **Where is Sarah your wife:** They called her according to her new name, given just a few weeks before (Genesis 17:15-16).

b. **I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son:** This promise of regeneration (**return to you according to the time of life**) was specifically made to Abraham. Sarah also was miraculously regenerated, but **this promise was to Abraham.**

c. **Sarah your wife shall have a son:** It seems that God dramatically repeated this promise to Abraham in a relatively short time (previously in [Genesis 17:17-22](#)). Like Abraham, we *need* to hear God's promises over and over again. It is a way God uses to encourage and develop our faith: *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* ([Romans 10:17](#)).

4. (11-12) Sarah's reaction to God's promise.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

b. **Therefore Sarah laughed within herself:** Significantly, this is what Sarah (and Abraham) *most wanted all their lives* – to have a child of their own. Yet they found it hard to believe God's promise when He said He would grant it to them.

c. **After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure:** Sarah laughed within herself at this promise. She could not believe God would literally grant this child as the result of normal sexual relations.

ii. It may be, even after the dramatic promises of [Genesis 17](#), Abraham and Sarah found some way to spiritualize God's promise, making it mean something other than what God intended. Here, God made it plain: Abraham and Sarah would have normal sexual relations and produce a baby.

5. (13-15) God answers Sarah's laugh.

And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

a. **Why did Sarah laugh:** God heard Sarah's laugh even though she *laughed within herself*. The sense was, her laugh could not be heard normally, but God heard it nevertheless. There was nothing hidden before the LORD.

i. We might live very differently if we remembered that God hears and knows everything we think and say.

b. **At the appointed time I will return to you:** When Sarah laughed at God's twice-given promise, we might think God would take the promise away. Instead, God responded by dealing with her sin of unbelief, not by taking away the promise.

c. **Is there anything too hard for the LORD:** God would demonstrate through Abraham and Sarah that there is *nothing too hard for the LORD*, and that God can even triumph over the weak faith of His people.

i. **Hard** is the same Hebrew word for *wonderful* in Isaiah 9:6: *For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given... And His name will be called Wonderful*. Jesus is our "wonderful" One, and He isn't too **hard** or wonderful for God to give unto us.

d. **The LORD said to Abraham:** Significantly, God dealt with **Abraham** about this, not Sarah herself, because Abraham was the head of his home. God promised that it would happen, and **at the appointed time**.

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