

SESSION 12

Genesis 17:1-10,15-19

Memory Verse: Genesis 17:7

God graciously chooses to make a covenant with His people.

Perhaps you've had the experience of graphing your life's journey, noting the high and low points in your life. As we study the life of Abram/Abraham, Genesis 17 may well be the high mark of his life—and the high point in Genesis, for that matter. Here, God reaffirmed the covenant relationship with Abram and announced that the wait was almost over. Before long, he would have a son with Sarai, the child of promise. God revealed Himself to Abram with a new name, *El Shaddai*, which speaks of God as the all-powerful and all-sufficient One. Along with this new name for Himself, God gave a new name to Abram and Sarai. The name change signify the start of something new.

Wedding ceremonies typically include the making of vows. A couple declares their commitment to each other by saying, "I do." God established marriage as a covenant. It is a formal agreement of commitment before God of a man and woman to one another until one of them dies. God's commitment to His people is also in the form of a covenant. Because God is eternal and faithful, His covenant with believers is everlasting. This truth is highlighted in God's covenant with Abraham. (PSG, p. 109)

What does God making covenants with His people reveal about Him?

Understand the Context (Genesis 17:1–18:15)

Genesis 17:1 sets the timeline for the story. By this time, Abram had been in Canaan for twenty-four years. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since God first promised him the land and a son from whom nations would descend. Twice Abram and Sarai had tried to "help" God. Abram suggested making Eliezer, his servant, his heir. Sarai created a scheme to raise a line through her servant Hagar. God rejected both attempts because He had a better plan.

In Genesis 17, God spoke to Abram to reaffirm the covenant. This appearance came in the form of a “theophany.” A theophany is a physical appearance or personal manifestation of God to a human being. Such appearances can be found throughout the Old Testament and take a variety of forms: human likeness (though not actually human), visions, the “Angel of the Lord,” and even a burning bush.

Theophanies offered instruction and affirmed God’s presence and care. They should not be confused with the incarnation of Jesus. While theophanies involved God appearing in a particular form, Jesus literally became a human being, taking on flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14).

One characteristic of the covenant between God and Abram is that it would be an everlasting or “permanent” covenant. God also gave specific instructions to Abram and his descendants concerning a sign of the covenant: circumcision. Circumcision indicated that Abraham and his descendants were in a covenant relationship with God. It marked membership in the covenant community.

Two more important things are recorded in chapter 17. First, Abram’s name, which meant “exalted father,” was changed to Abraham, which means “father of many.” Next, Sarai’s name was also changed to Sarah. While both names generally mean “princess,” this change could relate to the transition from the dialect of her previous homeland of Ur to the language of Canaan, the land of promise.

Chapter 17 also includes God’s promise that a great nation would come from Ishmael, Abraham’s son through Hagar. This was in response to Abraham’s plea for God’s blessing on Ishmael. While Ishmael was not the child of promise, God graciously honored Abram’s request.

Genesis 18 contains another theophany, as Abram was visited by three men. The text speaks of one of the men promising the birth of Isaac to Sarai (18:10). Three verses later the text states that “the Lord” was the One speaking to Abraham, demonstrating that this was an appearance of God in a theophany.

hold up their end of the agreement.

TRANSITION:

This session will focus on the fact that God keeps His promises and that He graciously chooses to continue honoring His covenant with His people. What does God making covenants with His people reveal about Him?

Covenant (Genesis 17:1-8)

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, **2** that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” **3** Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, **4** “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. **5** No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. **6** I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. **7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. **8** And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

(v. 1) *Appeared*: This is the fifth time God **appeared** to Abram (see also 12:1; 12:7; 13:14; 15:1). This appearance occurred after 13 years of silence. How God appeared to Abram is not specified, but this theophany contained some kind of visible manifestation. Abram expressed awe by falling on his face before God (v. 3).

Key Phrase

God Almighty

God began His affirmation of the covenant by identifying the parties involved in the contract. In Hebrew, this is *El Shaddai*. This is the first time God used this name for Himself in Genesis. It refers to His all-powerful and all-sufficient character. He needs no one outside of Himself. He can do anything and meet any need. This will be the name that God uses with the patriarchs going forward (see Ex. 6:3).

(v. 1) *Walk before me, and be blameless*: These two responses to who God is (Almighty) were an integral part of the covenant agreement. Walking in God’s

presence involves a continual awareness that He is present and watching. Such an awareness leads to conduct that honors God. **Blameless** doesn't mean sinless. Rather it refers to a single-hearted devotion to God, sincere in all areas of life.

(v. 2) Covenant: A **covenant** is an agreement between two parties where each has a responsibility. The word is used thirteen times in this chapter. God describes this as "my covenant" and mentioned four features of His agreement with Abram: (1) God would make Abram the father of many nations. (2) He would make Abram fruitful. (3) This was a permanent covenant. (4) Abram's descendants would possess Canaan.

(v. 5) Abraham: At this point God changed Abram's name to **Abraham**. The change essentially shifted Abraham's identity from "exalted father" to "father of many nations." Names were significant in the ancient Middle East. They described the essence of the person, as well as their character or destiny. Here, the shift aligned with the promises God had already made to Abraham. After decades of waiting, the time for becoming the **father of a multitude of nations** had arrived.

(v. 6) I will: In Genesis 17:1-8, God repeatedly emphasized what He would do. Each time, He confirmed His willingness and ability to move in history and act on Abraham's behalf. These promises from God are firm and would never be rescinded. For his part, Abraham was to be obedient, while God took care of the rest.

(v. 7) Everlasting covenant: This is an addition to the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 12. This is the first mention of the **everlasting** nature of the **covenant**. While the covenant was permanent from God's perspective, humans could violate its conditions by refusing circumcision (v. 14).

(v. 8) Everlasting possession: The permanency of the covenant was not just the relationship between God and the offspring of Abraham. It also dealt with the land of promise, Canaan. The descendants of Abraham had a tumultuous relationship with the land of Canaan over the centuries. The Israelites' ability to stay in the land depended on their obedience and loyalty to the Lord. Punishment for idolatry resulted in their removal from the land through exile.

The geographical area designated as Canaan varied throughout history. Roughly, it is the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. It extended in the south to the area near the Brook of Egypt and northward to the area of Syria.

EXPLORE Genesis 17:1-8

APPLICATION POINT:

Believers should recognize God’s grace in His dealings with them.

OVERVIEW

ASK:

Who initiated this covenant? Why is that significant?

ASK:

How does God’s covenant with Abraham impact followers of Jesus? (PSG, p. 114)

TRANSITION:

When God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram, He also changed his name to Abraham. In addition, God established a sign that would set His people apart from other nations.

Sign (Genesis 17:9-10)

9 And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”

Bible Skill

Look for organizational markers to aid in Scripture study.

Genesis 17 is an example of how words and phrases in a passage are often repeated. Such repetition is helpful in organizing a passage in such a way that enhances our understanding. For example, “as for me” (v. 4), “as for you” (v. 9), “as for your wife Sarai” (v. 15), and “as for Ishmael” (v. 20). These phrases form a way to track what God was planning for each person. Track the uses of the phrase “I

will” in Genesis 17:1-8. Make a list of all the things that God promised to do using this phrase.

(v. 9) *You and your offspring:* The requirement to honor the covenant sign of circumcision was incumbent on both Abraham and all his male descendants through Isaac. The **offspring** of Abraham through Ishmael were not a part of the covenant relationship, although Abraham circumcised Ishmael in obedience to God’s directive (See Gen. 17:24-27). This act of obedience was later codified in the law of Moses (Lev. 12:2-3).

Of course, with the new covenant brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the early church ceased requiring the practice of circumcision as a mark of relationship with God (Acts 15:1-21; Gal. 2:1-3). While some believers voluntarily were circumcised to remove roadblocks to ministry (Acts 16:1-5), baptism became the new public confession of a relationship with God through Christ. It remains so today.

Key Doctrine

God the Father

God is Father in truth to those who become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. (See Romans 4:13-17; Galatians 3:28-29.)

(v. 10) *You shall keep:* Abraham and his offspring were to uphold their part of the covenant, which was spelled out in verse 1: Living before God and remaining blameless. This obedience and loyalty to the Lord would be demonstrated physically through circumcision. The act of circumcision, of course, did not make them a member of the covenant community. Rather, it was a sign of their membership. Likewise, baptism doesn’t save anyone today. Instead, it is a sign that a person has experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

(v. 10) *Circumcised:* Circumcision was not unique to the Israelites. Other nations in the ancient world also practiced circumcision—but not as a sign of a covenant relationship. Some practiced it as a pre-marital ritual or an act establishing puberty. Others used it as a hygienic measure to prevent the spread of diseases.

For the descendants of Abraham, though, circumcision was a sign or badge of the covenant. Because a child was **circumcised** eight days after his birthday, the act really was obedience on the part of the parents. A failure to circumcise would have dire consequences because a person would be cut off (v. 14). This meant more than just rejection or exclusion from the nation of Israel. The term actually implied capital punishment—either at the hands of the community leaders or by God Himself.

As noted, circumcision became a touchy subject in the early church. (See Acts 10–15 for a fuller understanding of the controversy.) The apostle Paul subsequently went to great lengths to redefine what circumcision meant for Christians in Romans 2:25-29.

ASK:

How does the baptism of a follower of Jesus serve as a sign of agreement with the new covenant?

TRANSITION:

In addition to Abram's name change, God was going to change his wife's name too. All of this was preparation for God's ultimate act of faithfulness, providing the promised heir.

Promise (Genesis 17:15-19)

15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" 19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."

(v. 15) Sarai . . . Sarah: Both names mean “princess,” but the change in spelling has been explained several ways. Some scholars suggest it reflected a change in the dialect, with **Sarai** being association with the language of Ur of the Chaldeans and **Sarah** being more closely associated with Canaanite languages. It also could have signaled a new chapter in her life. Certainly, one who would give birth to kings should be called “princess.”

(v. 16) Son by her: This is the first specific mention that the **son** promised to Abraham would come through Sarah. Thus, the lawful wife of Abraham would give birth to the son of promise. This announcement of a son born to Sarah certainly ruled out Ishmael.

The Hebrew grammar also speaks of the immediacy of this birth. There would be no more waiting. In Genesis 18:14, God told Abraham the child would be born “about this time next year.” It is worth noting that God promised a blessing on Sarah. Normally, the blessing was pronounced on the male ancestor of the offspring to come.

(v. 17) Abraham fell on his face: This is the same reaction seen in verse 3. To fall on one’s face meant to kneel with one’s hands spread out and the forehead touching the ground. This was a genuine way of expressing humility and utmost reverence. No doubt Abraham was filled with wonder and gratitude.

(v. 17) Laughed: Much laughter was associated with the birth of Isaac, whose name means “laughter.” Here, Abraham **laughed** with joy at the prospect of a son to be born to Sarah and him at such an advanced age. In Genesis 18:12, Sarah laughed at the news that she would be pregnant at 89 years of age. In Genesis 18:13, God called Abraham’s attention to Sarah’s laughter and announced that nothing was too hard for God to accomplish. Sarah’s laughter probably contained elements of doubt. However, in Genesis 21:6-7, Sarah also laughed with great joy.

(v. 18) That Ishmael might live before you: There is no doubt that Abraham loved •**Ishmael**. At this time, Ishmael would have been about 13, and Abraham had obviously grown fond of the boy. While God promised to bless Ishmael and his descendants, he would never be the promised heir of the covenant. In fact, with

the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:1-8), Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, were driven from the camp of Abraham and Sarah (21:9-21).

(v. 19) No: In the original Hebrew, this word (*aval*) is an adverb that carries the force of an interjection. It could also mean “truly!” In this context, it means that God was strongly rejecting Abraham’s suggestion about accepting Ishmael as the son of promise and was emphasizing the contrast of •**Isaac** (as the son of Sarah) stepping into that role. Again, God was making it clear that Abraham’s shortcuts and alternative solutions were not acceptable because God was working out His plan according to His own timing.

(v. 19) Establish my covenant with him: God responded to Abraham’s request by acknowledging that his prayers had been heard. God promised to give Ishmael a prominent future and to build a great people from him. The family tree of Ishmael is listed in Genesis 25:12-18, but the promises of the **covenant** were reserved for Isaac and his descendants.

EXPLORE Genesis 17:15-19

APPLICATION POINT:

Believers should trust God to accomplish what only He can accomplish.

Call for a volunteer to read Genesis 17:15-19, directing the group to listen for the new name given to Sarai.

DISCUSS:

Direct attention to the comments on verses 15-16 (PSG, pp. 115-116). Briefly share the significance of Sarai’s name change. Direct the group to review the information about verses 17-18 (PSG, p. 116). Discuss the difference between what Abraham did in verse 3 and what he did in verse 17. Encourage adults to share their thoughts about the suggestion Abraham made to God in verse 18.

SHARE:

C.S. Lewis once said that when we argue with God we are arguing with the One who gave us the ability to argue. Of course, God is not offended by our arguments;

but, if we're honest, we will acknowledge that He always knows best. That's the beauty of "But God" moments.

ASK:

Why might our human limits get in the way of accepting God's plan and promises?

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 117 of the Personal Study Guide:

- *Believers should recognize God's grace in His dealings with them.*
- *Believers are to demonstrate their faith in Jesus.*
- *Believers should trust God to accomplish what only He can accomplish.*