

Genesis Chapter 17

Genesis 17:1 "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I [am] the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect."

“Almighty God”: (Hebrew El Shaday): El denotes “power” and “shaddai” may be derived from the Akkadian shadadu, to “overpower,” portraying God as the overpowering, almighty One who will supernaturally provide descendants for Abram when all other means fail.

This statement, above, did not say that an angel appeared. It said the LORD appeared to Abram.

When this personality met Abram, He explained to Abram how He is Almighty God. This is a plural word meaning most majestic supreme God. This all powerful God gave Abram a charge to live a holy life. We cannot be perfect in our flesh, but God wants us to try to be perfect.

Genesis 17:2 "And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly."

“My covenant between me and thee”: Another reaffirmation of His unilateral covenant with Abram, which did not mean that there would be no responsibilities falling upon its recipients (See notes on verses 7-9 below and on 12:1-3; 15:13-21).

God again, was renewing His covenant with Abram. This time it was a blood covenant. He, again, promised to multiply Abram's seed.

Genesis 17:3 "And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,"

"And Abram fell on his face": At the sight of so glorious a Person that appeared to him, and in reverence of his majesty, and as sensible of his unworthiness of such a visit, and of having such favors bestowed upon him.

This is the lowliest form of reverence, in which the worshipper leans on his knees and elbows, and his forehead approaches the ground. Prostration is still customary in the East. Abram has attained to loftier notions of God.

"God talked with him." Yahweh, El Shaddai, is here called God. The Supreme appears as the Author of existence, the Irresistible and Everlasting, in this stage of the covenant relation.

After he was raised up, and was strengthened and encouraged to stand up before God, and hear what he had to say to him; for after this we read of his falling on his face again (Genesis 17:17); which shows that he had been erect, after he first fell on his face

Genesis 17:4 "As for me, behold, my covenant [is] with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations."

“Father of many nations”: The 3-fold reaffirmation of the divine promise of many descendants, perhaps including Isaac’s and Ishmael’s, brackets the change of name (verses 4-6), giving it significant emphasis.

The only place any person can be in the presence of God is on his face, in total reverence to God. This voice of God is unmistakable; there is no question who this is, when you hear this voice. You see, Abram did not decide to make a covenant with God. God chose to make a covenant with Abram. He promised one more time that Abram would be a father of many nations.

Genesis 17:5 "Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee."

“Thy name shall be Abraham” (17:5). The name meaning “father of many nations” reflected Abraham’s new relationship to God as well as his new identity based on God’s promise of seed (Rom. 4:17).

Abram means “High Father,” but he is now to be called Abraham, suggesting he will become the father of a multitude.

His name was now being changed from Abram (high father), to Abraham (father of a multitude). Notice that this statement above, is past tense. God had decided long ago to make Abraham father of many nations.

Genesis 17:6 "And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee."

“Kings shall come out of thee”: This promise highlights the reality of more than one people group, or nation in its own right, coming from Abraham.

Here, God was just reassuring Abraham that he would have many descendants, even though he was now 99 years old.

Genesis 17:7-8 "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." "And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

“I will establish my covenant”: This relationship was set up at God’s initiative and also designated as an “everlasting covenant” (verse 7), thus applying to Abraham’s posterity with equal force and bringing forth the declaration “I will be their God” (verse 8). This pledge became the dictum of the covenant relationship between Yahweh, i.e., Jehovah and Israel.

“Everlasting covenant ... I will give ... the land”: Since the covenant is “everlasting” and includes possession of “Canaan,” it guarantees Israel the right of possession as an earthly inheritance forever. God is the Landlord who gives the title deed to Israel, His son. Thus, the Jews have a rightful claim to this land as long as the earth shall stand.

“All the land of Canaan”: God’s reaffirmation of His covenant promises to Abraham did not occur without mention of the land being deeded by divine right to him and his descendants as "an everlasting possession" (Acts 7:5).

This was an everlasting blood covenant that God, Himself, established. He told Abraham that this covenant was not just with him, but this covenant would extend to all of his ancestors for all of eternity. When Abraham lived here in Canaan, this land was occupied by evil Canaanite men. The only provision was that God be worshipped by Abraham and his descendants.

Verses 9-14: Abraham’s part in the covenant-making process was circumcision, which God established as a sign of the covenant to indicate that this offspring were uniquely dedicated to God (Exodus 4:24-26; Rom. 4:11).

A Hebrew who failed to observe this rite would be cut off from the covenant community. Circumcision was to serve as an outward sign of inward dedication to God. In itself, it was neither effective nor unique to Israel.

Genesis 17:9 "And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations."

“Thou shalt keep my covenant”: Despite repeated disobedience by the patriarchs and the nation, God’s faithfulness to His covenant commitment never wavered (e.g., Deut. 4:25-31; 30:1-9; 1 Chron. 16:15-18; Jer. 30:11; 46:27-28; Amos 9:8; Luke 1:67-75; Heb. 6:13-18).

Divine witnesses of Abraham’s obedience (22:16-18; 26:3-5) were pronounced years after the formal establishment of His covenant (12:1-3; 15:12-18). Though the nation was apostate, there was always an obedient remnant of faithful Israelites (see Zeph. 3:12-13).

Genesis 17:10 "This [is] my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised."

“This is my covenant”: The other party to the covenant now learns his obligation. "Every male of you shall be circumcised."

Circumcision, as the rainbow covenant, might have been in existence before it was adopted as the token of a covenant. The sign of the covenant with Noah was a purely natural phenomenon, and therefore entirely independent of man. That of the Abrahamic covenant was an artificial process, and therefore, though prescribed by God, was dependent on the voluntary agency of man.

The former marked the sovereignty of God in ratifying the covenant and insuring its fulfillment, notwithstanding the mutability of man; the latter indicates the responsibility of man, the trust he places in the word of promise, and the agreement he gives to the terms of the divine mercy.

As the former covenant conveys a common natural blessing to all mankind and contemplates a common spiritual blessing, so the latter conveys a special spiritual blessing and contemplates its universal acceptance.

The rainbow was the appropriate natural emblem of preservation from a flood; and the removal of the foreskin was the fit symbol of that removal of the old man and renewal of nature, which qualified Abraham to be the parent of a holy seed.

And as the former sign foreshadows an incorruptible inheritance, so the latter prepares the way for a holy seed, by which the holiness and the heritage will at length be universally extended.

Not only Abraham and Isaac, and his posterity by Isaac, were to be circumcised, but also Ishmael and the bond-servants.

Genesis 17:11 "And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you."

“Token of the covenant”: Circumcision (cutting away the male foreskin), was not entirely new in this period of history, but the special religious and theocratic significance then applied to it was entirely new, thus identifying the circumcised as belonging to the physical and ethnical lineage of Abraham (Acts 7:8; Rom. 4:11).

Every man child among you shall be circumcised": This was the sign in the Old Testament Church as baptism is in the New, and hence the covenant is called "covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8; Rom. 4:11).

The terms of the covenant were these: on the one hand Abraham and his seed were to observe the right of circumcision. On the other, God promised, in the event of such observance, to give them Canaan for a perpetual possession. To be a God to him and his posterity, and that in him and his seed all nations should be blessed.

The covenant of grace is from everlasting in the counsels of it, and to everlasting in the consequences of it. The token of the covenant was circumcision. It is here said to be the covenant which Abraham and his seed must keep. Those who will have the Lord to be to them a God, must resolve to be to him a people.

It sealed not only the covenant of the land of Canaan to Isaac's posterity, but of heaven, through Christ, to the whole church of God. The outward sign is for the visible church; the inward seal of the Spirit is peculiar to those whom God knows to be believers, and he alone can know them.

The religious observance of this institution was required, under a very severe penalty. It is dangerous to make light of Divine institutions, and to live in the neglect of them. The covenant in question was one that involved great blessings for the world in all future ages.

Even the blessedness of Abraham himself, and all the rewards conferred upon him, were for Christ's sake. Abraham was justified, as we have seen, not by his own righteousness, but by faith in the promised Messiah.

Genesis 17:12-13 "And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which [is] not of thy seed." "He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant."

The time of circumcision is the eighth day. At this stage, accordingly, the sign of sanctification is made on the child, betokening the consecration of the heart to God, when its rational powers have come into noticeable activity.

To be "cut off from his people" is to be excluded from any part in the covenant, and treated simply as a Gentile or alien, some of whom seem to have dwelt among the Israelites

“Eight days old”: This same time frame was repeated (in Lev. 12:3).

He that is born in thine house, and he that is bought with thy money, "must needs be circumcised": this is repeated to denote the necessity of it, and what care should be taken that this be done, because there was to be no uncircumcised male among them (Genesis 17:10); nor any conversation and communion to be had among them, especially in a religious way.

"And my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant": Circumcision was to be seen in their flesh, and no methods were to be taken to draw over the foreskin again, but it was to continue as long as they lived; and so in their posterity, in all succeeding ages, as a sign of the covenant and promise which should remain until the Messiah's coming.

This seems like a strange request from God, but these were the physical descendants of Abraham that were mentioned here. This separated the Hebrew men from the men of the world. This sealed the blood covenant. Remember, Abraham was 99 and his son Ishmael 13 when they were circumcised, so this was no small sacrifice they made to seal the covenant.

Genesis 17:14 "And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant."

“Shall be cut off from his people”: Being cut off from the covenant community meant loss of temporal benefits stemming from being part of the special, chosen and theocratic (a country ruled by religious leaders), nation, even to the point of death by divine judgment.

In verse 14, we see covenant breakers would not receive blessings from God.

Genesis 17:15 "And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah [shall] her name [be]."

“Sarai ... Sarah”: Fittingly, since Sarai (“my princess”), would be the ancestress of the promised nations and kings. God changed her name to Sarah, taking away the limiting personal pronoun “my,” and calling her “princess” (verse 16).

God really did not regard Hagar as Abraham's wife. The wife that God recognized was Sarah. God's promises would come through her.

Genesis 17:16 "And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be [a mother] of nations; kings of people shall be of her."

"And I will bless her": The Targum of Jonathan adds, "in her body", with fruitfulness, who before was barren, and in her soul with spiritual blessings, and in both with the blessing of eternal life.

"And give thee a son also of her" as he had given him one of Hagar. God had before promised Abraham a son that should be his heir, but he had not until now told him that he should be born of Sarah his wife.

“Yea, I will bless her” which is repeated for the confirmation of it, "and for the greater strengthening Abraham's faith in it". And she shall be a “mother of nations” of the twelve tribes of Israel; of the two nations of Israel and Judah. Kings of people shall be of her; as David, Solomon, and others, and especially the King Messiah. “Mother of nations” (17:5).

He told Abraham, again, you will have a son by Sarah, and I will bless you through this wife. These descendants through the spirit would be a more noble heritage.

Genesis 17:17 "Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall [a child] be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?"

“Fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart”: A proper reaction of adoration over God’s promises was marred by the incredulity of Abraham. He knew he was to be a father (12:2; 15:4), but this was the first mention that his barren, old wife was to be the mother.

“Then Abraham ... laughed”: It seems strange that Abraham laughs at the idea of a hundred-year-old man begetting a son, when his own father was 130 at the time of his birth.

Sarah would die when he was 137, but he was able to beget sons long after that (25:1-6). Paul states that when he was 100, “He considered not his own body now dead” (Rom. 4:19). This laughter is one of doubt as verse 18 reveals.

Abraham could not believe that it was possible for him and Sarah to have a child, as old as they were. In the flesh, it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. As I said before, the Hebrews thought it a great blessing to have children, and if they didn't, they felt God was angry with them for some reason.

Genesis 17:18 "And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!"

Abraham's pleas, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" indicates his wish to adopt him as his heir (15:2-3; Psalm 2:7). And the law code of Hammurabi for the legal statement of adoption expressed by "thou art my child," and when God declared officially that Jesus was His Son, at the Resurrection (Rom. 1:4).

Quite a bit of time had lapsed from the birth of Ishmael to now, thirteen years, Ishmael was now a teenager.

Abraham's plea for a living son to be the designated beneficiary of God's promises betrayed just how impossible it was for him and Sarah to have children (Rom. 4:17).

Abraham still just could not believe that he and Sarah could have a son, and he was saying to God, bless me through Ishmael. However, God had other plans.

Verses 19-21: Again, patiently but firmly rejecting Abraham's alternative solution, God emphatically settled the matter by bracketing His gracious bestowal of much posterity to Ishmael (see 25:12-18). With affirmations that indeed Sarah's son would be the heir of the "everlasting covenant." For the first time, God named the son.

Genesis 17:19 "And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, [and] with his seed after him."

"Thou shalt call his name Isaac": The name means He Laughs" and was to serve as a reminder to Abraham of the unlikely means by which he was brought into the world. And his response in (17:17), and Sarah's reaction (in 18:12).

Genesis 17:20 "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation."

Abraham seems up to this time to have regarded Ishmael as the promised seed. Hence, a feeling of anxiety instantly penetrates his breast. It finds utterance in the prayer, "Oh that Ishmael might live before thee" (verse 18).

He asks "life" for his beloved son, that is, a share in the divine favor. And that "before God" that is, a life of holiness and communion with God. But God declares positively his purpose of giving him a son by Sarah. This son is to be called Isaac, he that laughs or he shall laugh, in reference to the various emotions of surprise and delight with which his parents regarded his birth.

Abram's prayer for Ishmael, however, is not unanswered. He is to be fruitful, beget twelve princes, and become a great nation. But Isaac is to be the heir of promise. At the present season next year, he is to be born. The communication being completed, "God went" up from Abram.

The blessings of the covenant are reserved for Isaac, but common blessings were abundantly promised to Ishmael. And though the visible Church did not descend from his family, yet personally he might, and it is to be hoped did, enjoy its benefits.

Genesis 17:21 "But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year."

"My covenant will I establish with Isaac": All temporal good things are promised to Ishmael and his posterity, but the establishment of the Lord's covenant is to be with Isaac. Hence it is fully evident that this covenant referred chiefly to spiritual things. To the Messiah, and the salvation which should be brought to both Jews and Gentiles by his incarnation, death, and glorification.

But the covenant, God repeated, should be established with Isaac, whom Sarah was to bear to him at that very time in the following year.

Since Ishmael therefore was excluded from participating in the covenant grace, which was ensured to Isaac alone; and yet Abraham was to become a multitude of nations, and that through Sarah, who was to become "nations" through the son she was to bear (Gen. 17:16).

The "multitude of nations" could not include either the Ishmaelites or the tribes descended from the sons of Keturah (Genesis 25:2.), but the descendants of Isaac alone.

And as one of Isaac's two sons received no part of the covenant promise, but the descendants of Jacob alone. But the whole of the twelve sons of Jacob founded only the one nation of Israel, with which Jehovah established the covenant made with Abraham (Exodus 6 and 20-24). So that Abraham became through Israel the lineal father of one nation only.

Abraham, being a loving father, wanted God to bless his son, Ishmael. God heard and blessed him, but it was a physical earthly blessing. The things God promised Ishmael were not spiritual blessings. These two sons represented the flesh and the spirit. "Isaac" means laughs.

Genesis 17:22 "And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham."

"God went up from Abraham": Ascended evidently before him, so that he had the fullest proof that it was no human being, no earthly angel or messenger, that talked with him.

And the promise of a son in the course of a single year, at this set time in the next year (Gen. 17:21). Which had every human probability against it, was to be the sure token of the truth of all that had hitherto taken place, and the proof that all that was farther promised should be fulfilled in its due time.

Was it not in nearly the same way in which the Lord went up from Abraham, that Jesus Christ ascended to heaven in the presence of his disciples? (Luke 24:51).

Verses 23-27: "The selfsame day": Without delay, Abraham fully carried out God's command on himself, on "every male," and on "all the men of this household".

Genesis 17:23 "And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him."

"And Abraham took Ishmael his son": To circumcise him; he took his son first, to set an example to his servants, and that they might the more readily comply when they saw that Abraham's son, and at that time his only son, was circumcised before their eyes.

"Then all that were born in his house" which were three hundred and eighteen when he rescued Lot from the kings (Gen. 14:14); and perhaps they might be now increased.

"And all that were bought with his money": how many those were, it is not easy to say, no doubt they were many.

"Every male among the men of Abraham's house": whether children or servants, and those little or grown up.

"And circumcised the flesh of their foreskin, in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him": he performed this operation in the manner God directed him, the same day he spoke to him of it. He was not disobedient, nor slow to obey the command of God, but at once complied with it, not consulting flesh and blood, not regarding the pain he and his should endure.

Or considered the shame or danger they should be exposed unto through the Heathens about them; but trusting in God, and committing himself to him, and having his fear before his eyes, he hesitated not, but cheerfully did the will of God.

Genesis 17:24 "And Abraham [was] ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin."

"And Abraham was ninety years old and nine" (see Gen. 17:1). This circumstance of his age is observed the more to commend his faith and obedience, that though he was an old man, he did not consider his age, or make that an objection. That he was unable to bear the pain, or it would be shameful for a man of his years to be uncovered before his servants.

He did it because God bade him. It was a speedy obedience; in the self-same day. Sincere obedience makes no delay. Not only the doctrines of Revelation, but the seals of God's covenant, remind us that we are guilty, polluted sinners. They show us our need of the blood of atonement; they point to the promised Savior, and teach us to exercise faith in him.

They show us that without regeneration, and sanctification by his Spirit, and the mortification of our corrupt and carnal inclinations, we cannot be in covenant with God. But let us remember that the true circumcision is that of the heart, by the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29).

Both under the old and new dispensation, many have had the outward profession, and the outward seal, who were never sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise.

Genesis 17:25 "And Ishmael his son [was] thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin."

In the same day. In this passage, we have the prompt and punctual fulfillment of the command concerning circumcision detailed with all the minuteness due to its importance. Ishmael was thirteen years of age when he was circumcised.

Genesis 17:26 "In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son."

"In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son": This is repeated, that it might be taken notice of that both were circumcised according to the command of God.

And on the very day in which it was given. Jarchi observes, it was in the day, and not in the night; showing, says he, Abraham was not afraid of the Heathen, or of mockers. And that his enemies and the men of that generation, might not say; if we had seen him, we would not have suffered him to be circumcised, and keep the commandment of God.

Genesis 17:27 "And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him."

"And all the men of his house": All the males, whether children or adult: born in the house, or bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him; by their will, and with their consent.

They were not forced into it, as Aben Ezra rightly observes. And these being before trained up by him in religious exercises, were more easily prevailed upon by him to follow his example. This also is repeated, that it might be served, and be an example to follow in after generations.

One thing we must take note of here, Abraham carried out his covenant with God to the utmost.

Genesis Chapter 17 Questions

1. Whom did God call Himself to Abraham?
2. How old was Ishmael, when God visited Abraham here?
3. What does Almighty God mean?

4. What effect did God's presence have on Abraham?
5. What does "Abraham" mean?
6. In verse 6, what 3 things did God promise?
7. What land did God promise to give Abraham's descendants?
8. What was the sign of the covenant?
9. How old was a baby boy to be when this happened to him?
10. Who, besides the immediate family, did this involve?
11. What separated Hebrew men from other men?
12. Any Hebrew man refusing to be circumcised hath done what?
13. What was Sarai's name changed to?
14. What does it mean?
15. What kind of blessing did God speak on Sarah?
16. When Abraham was told by God that he would have a son by Sarah, what did he do?
17. In verse 18, what was Abraham asking God for?
18. What was Abraham's and Sarah's son to be named?
19. What does it mean?
20. To what extent did Abraham keep the covenant?