

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.

a. **The LORD appeared to Abram:**

b. **I am Almighty God:** First, God told Abram who He is. By this name *El Shaddai*, He revealed His Person and character to Abram. What does *El Shaddai* mean?

i. Kidner: "A traditional analysis of the name is 'God (*el*) who (*sa*) is sufficient (*day*).'"

c. **Walk before Me and be blameless:** Then God told Abram what was expected of him. We can only do what God expects of us when we know who He is and know it in a full, personal, real way.

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

d. **I will make My covenant between Me and you:** God also reminded Abram He has 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.

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

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

b. **As an everlasting possession:** To encourage Abraham's faith in the promise of the land, God repeated the promise again, reminding Abraham it is an **everlasting possession** given by an **everlasting covenant**.

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

a. **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 them to take upon themselves a **sign of the covenant**, showing they received the covenant by faith.

b. **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 practice 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 showing an incredibly 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.

c. **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.

d. **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.

i. Unfortunately, through the centuries, the Jews began to trust more in the *sign* of the covenant (circumcision) than in the *God* of the covenant, believing that circumcision by itself was sufficient and necessary to save. Paul refutes this idea extensively, especially in light of the finished work of Jesus (Galatians 5:1-15).

ii. Therefore, Christians are free to either circumcise or not. One may do so for social or hygienic reasons but it doesn't get us any closer to God: *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.* (Galatians 5:6)

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.
 - 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. "*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).
 - b. **And I will bless her and also give you a son by her:** God made it plain that this son will not come about by another surrogate-mother situation (as with Hagar and Ishmael). Sarah herself will give birth, even though it is past her time in life to do so (Sarah was about 90 years old at this time).
2. (17-18) Abraham's response to the promise.
 - a. **Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed:** Abraham's laugh didn't seem to be one of cynical doubt, but of rejoicing in something he knew was impossible by all outward appearance, but that God could perform.
 - b. **Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old?** He knew both he and Sarah were well past the time people normally have children. Yet, *in the presence of Him whom he believed; God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.* (Romans 4:17-21)
 - 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 can conceive of.
3. (19-22) God repeats the promise and names the child who will come forth from Abraham and Sarah.
 - 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 will 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 (because Abraham prayed he would), but the covenant and its promises will pass only through the son to come, the son of promise.
4. (23-27) Abraham carries out God's command of circumcision.
 - a. **And circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him:** Abraham's belief in the covenant was proved by his obedience to the command. What we really believe will show in our actions.
 - b. **That very same day Abraham was circumcised:** Abraham's obedience was *complete* (**every male among the men of Abraham's house**), *prompt* (**that very same day**), and *daring* (to virtually incapacitate all his 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.

Application/Conclusion: People of the Jewish faith are still under the original or older covenant and circumcision was an outward sign of an inward commitment to God's covenant with them. As Christians, we have a new covenant, which is our belief that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Christians use communion as a **sign of that covenant**, showing that we have received the covenant **by faith**. The proof of this is found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; **For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."** ²⁵**In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."** ²⁶**For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

References:

The Bible, David Guzik, Zondervans Pictorial Encyclopedia