

## Genesis 17

This chapter of the Bible starts out with God talking to Abraham. He has some very important things to tell him:

**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.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.”

In order to understand what's going on, we need to take a moment to go back and study the life of Abraham. His relationship with God didn't start when he was 99 years old; no, it started a long time before that.

When Abraham was 75 years old he was living in a place called Haran. While he was there the Lord appeared to him and told him to leave his home and go to the place the Lord would show him. God promised that if he did that the Lord would bless him, give him a great name, and turn him into a great nation.

So Abraham obeyed God. He left his home and moved to the land of Canaan. Years went by, but Abraham never had any children. God kept promising to give Abraham descendants but it never happened. Eventually Abraham's wife Sarah got tired of waiting to have children, and convinced the 86-year-old Abraham to have a child with her maidservant Hagar. Abraham did as she asked and had a child named Ishmael. When Sarah saw this she got *very* upset. She was not at all pleased.

Genesis 16 tells us about the birth of the child Ishmael. In Genesis 17, 13 years have gone by. Abraham still doesn't have any descendants of his own. It had been 24 years since the Lord came to him and made all those promises, and so far not a single one of them has come true. Abraham has had no children with his wife; he is not a great nation; he did not have a great name; and his descendants certainly didn't own the entire land of Canaan. Abraham has been waiting but nothing has happened.

But notice what God says to Abraham in the first verse: walk before me, and be thou perfect. God wants Abraham to obey the Lord and trust him. Even though Abraham was now an old man and had not seen the fulfillment of any promises, God still commanded him to be faithful. Now, we know that God did eventually keep all of his promises to Abraham and that He did everything that He promised, but at this point in his life Abraham hadn't seen any of those things. God is commanding Abraham to step out on faith and trust God. He is telling Abraham to do what is right, even though it doesn't seem to have done any good so far. What God wants from Abraham is *faith*.

God is promising Abraham that if he has faith and walks in the Lord's ways, that the Lord will give him the child that he has desired for so long. The Lord is still going to keep His promises – as long as Abraham has faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

This encounter overwhelmed Abraham:

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

This is a very common reaction to meeting the Lord. When the apostle John saw the risen Jesus in the book of Revelation, he had an even more severe reaction:

**Revelation 1:17:** “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last:”

Meeting the Lord is an overwhelming thing. God is perfect, infinite, and holy; man is limited and full of sins. It is no wonder that Abraham fell on his face when God came to him.

The Lord has much more to tell this man. He told Abraham that he was going to be great, and would be the father of nations:

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

When we think of Abraham we tend to think of the Jews, but that is not the only nation that came from Abraham. Ishmael and Esau were also the heads of nations. Genesis 25:13-16 tells us that Ishmael had twelve sons, who became princes:

**Genesis 25:13:** “And these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: the firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; and Kedar, and Adbeel, and Mibsam,  
14 And Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa,  
15 Hadar, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah:  
16 These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations.”

Ishmael became father of the Arab peoples. As you can see, Ishmael's sons became the heads of nations. The same thing happened to Isaac's son Esau. His descendents moved to Mount Seir, where they became the Edomites:

**Genesis 36:8:** “Thus dwelt Esau in mount Seir: Esau is Edom.  
9 And these are the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in mount Seir:”

Genesis 36 lists all of Esau's descendents, who became the Edomite people. Abraham really did become the father of nations. He was the father of more than just the Israelites.

But God is not done. He then changes his name from Abram to Abraham:

**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.”

The name Abram means “exalted father”, whereas Abraham means “father of many”. When God changed his name, He was emphasizing the fact that Abraham was going to be the father of many nations – which is exactly what the Lord had promised Abraham all those years ago. The name change was a reflection of God's covenant with Abraham. It was a sign that the Lord had changed Abraham. He was not just a father; he was a father of nations. God's covenant with Abraham had turned him into a different person and given him a different future. He was not the same person that he used to be before he met God.

God then emphasized this promise:

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

Notice how this verse says that God *will* make Abraham fruitful. This speaks of something that is to come in the future; it is not referring to something that has already happened in the past. This promise also came true. A year after this encounter with God, Abraham's son Isaac was born. However, that was not Abraham's last child. After his wife Sarah died he remarried and had even more children:

**Genesis 25:1:** “Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah.  
2 And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah.”

But that's not all. The Bible also says that Abraham had other children whose names are not listed:

**Genesis 25:6:** “But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country.”

We don't know who Abraham's concubines were or how many sons he had with them, but it's clear that Abraham had more than just two children (Ishmael and Isaac). God promised to make Abraham fruitful, and that is exactly what happened. God always keeps His promises. The Lord promised that nations would come from Abraham, and they did. He promised that kings would be in his line of descendents, and they were. Just think about all the kings of Israel: every one of them was a descendent of Abraham. Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is also in the line of Abraham. Abraham fathered more than just a few kings; there were *many* kings in his line.

God then repeated the fact that He was establishing an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendents:

**Genesis 17:7:** “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.

8 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.”

In this everlasting covenant, the Lord promised two things: to be a God to Abraham's descendents, and to give his descendents “all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession”. This is one of the key covenants in the Old Testament, and it deserves more than just a passing mention.

This covenant with Abraham is the reason why the Lord will never abandon the Israelites, no matter how disobedient or rebellious they may be. God promised to be a God to them and He will never break that promise. This covenant is the reason why God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt:

**Exodus 2:23:** “And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.

24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

25 And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them.”

God told the nation of Israel that if they disobeyed Him then He would cast them out of the land of Canaan. However, if they repented then the Lord would restore them to the land. The reason He would do this is because of the covenant God made with Abraham:

**Leviticus 26:40:** “If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me;

41 And that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity:

42 Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.”

In fact, God said that this covenant was the reason He would never forsake the nation of Israel:

**Leviticus 26:44:** “And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God.

45 But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.”

This covenant secured Israel's future and their place as God's chosen people. Because of this covenant God would always watch over Israel and care for them, and He would always keep them from being utterly destroyed. Even in the days before the Babylonian exile, when the Israelites were exceedingly wicked and refused to repent, the Lord still refused to utterly destroy them and He delayed casting them out of the land. The reason He did those things was because of the covenant He had made with Abraham:

**2 Kings 13:23:** “And the Lord was gracious unto them, and had compassion on them, and had respect unto them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, neither cast he them from his presence as yet.”

God loves Israel and cares for them, and that will never change. It is true that right now Israel has rejected their Messiah and is living in rebellion against God. At the moment Israel has been blinded, but that will not always be the case. The Bible promises that one day Israel will be saved:

**Romans 11:25:** “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

26 And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the

Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

27 For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

28 As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the father's sakes.

29 For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”

The book of Zechariah looks forward to a time when Israel will repent of their rejection of the Messiah and will mourn over what they have done:

**Zechariah 12:10:** “And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.”

God has a plan to save Israel and turn their hearts back to Him. Israel will not be lost forever.

The second part of God's covenant with Abraham says that the Lord has given Israel all the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. This means that that plot of land in the Middle East is theirs *forever* and can never be taken away from them. It's true that there have been times when God has removed them from the land because of their disobedience, but those removals are always temporary. The title to that land belongs to Israel, and that will never change. God even told Abraham exactly how much land He was going to give Israel:

**Genesis 15:18:** “In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:”

Everything between the Nile and the Euphrates rivers (a distance of some 1500 miles) belongs to Israel. There may be other nations that try to take that land from Israel, but the land will never actually belong to them. God has given it to Israel as an everlasting possession, and that will never change. The Lord becomes very angry when nations try to take away the land that He gave to Israel:

**Joel 3:2:** “I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land.”

This passage is speaking of the Second Coming – the time when Jesus Christ will return to Earth. When He returns He is going to attack the nations that dared to come against Israel and *take her land*. Not only is the Lord going to judge this sin, but He is going to do it *in person*. That is how big a deal this is to God.

Now that the terms of the covenant have been laid out, God gave Abraham the sign of the covenant. That sign was to be circumcision:

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

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.

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

12 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.

13 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.”

God entered into a covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendents. The sign that the Jews were covered by this covenant was circumcision – it signified that they were partakers of God's promises. Circumcision did not save them or forgive their sins. It was just a token; it did not have saving power. Each male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day of their life. Those who did not do this would be cut off from 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.”

The Lord took this very seriously. To get an idea of just how serious this was, we need only to look at the life of Moses. The Bible tells us that Moses failed to circumcise his own son. God was so angry with him about this that He tried to kill Moses:

**Exodus 4:24:** “And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him.

25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.

26 So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.”

The reason God did this is because Moses was supposed to be Israel's leader. God had sent him to Egypt to lead the people out of bondage – but Moses had not kept God's covenant. Moses was required to circumcise his children, but he hadn't. How could Moses lead God's people when he had failed to keep God's covenant? That is why the Lord was so angry with him. Moses' behavior was not acceptable.

In New Testament times there was a great debate about the issue of circumcision. Some people taught that all Christians were required to be circumcised because that was part of the Law. They claimed that keeping the entire Mosaic Law was part of being a Christian. However, the the apostle Paul explained that this was a misunderstanding of what circumcision actually was. The Jews thought that it made a person righteous, but that is *not* the case. Righteousness comes by faith, not by works. Paul proved this by pointing out that God declared Abraham to be righteous long before he was circumcised. Circumcision was just a sign of the covenant. It didn't actually save anybody:

**Romans 4:9:** “Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.

10 How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?

Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:

12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.”

It is *faith* that saves us, not works or circumcision or anything else. Circumcision was important in the Old Testament, but it is not important today. What really matters today is keeping God's commandments:

**1 Corinthians 7:19:** “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.”

**Galatians 5:6:** “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.”

Circumcision never had any saving power because salvation has always come through faith. This was true even in the days of Abraham. Christians today are required to repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ so that they might be saved. They are *not* required to be circumcised, nor are they required to keep the Mosaic Law. As the Bible says, we are not under the law anymore; instead we are under grace.

After God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision, He told him that his wife Sarah would have a son:

**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.

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.”

God had promised to give Abraham a son, and the Lord was going to keep that promise. Abraham and Sarah would have a child after all these long years, in the time of their old age. The Lord also changed the name of Abraham's wife from Sarai to Sarah. (As far as I can tell, both of those names mean “princess”.) Abraham and Sarah were both given new names, new hope, and a new future.

When Abraham heard this he was astonished. The thought of having children at such an old age seemed impossible:

**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?”

The whole situation seemed so preposterous. Abraham and Sarah were far too old to have children – and yet that is exactly what God said would happen. It seemed ridiculous. So Abraham asked God to bless Ishmael instead:

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

Abraham believed that he already has a son – the child he had with his bondmaid Hagar. He seems to be content with Ishmael. However, the Lord had bigger plans. Ishmael was not the son that God had promised, and he was not the son that God was going to make His covenant with. The Lord had chosen Isaac:

**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.”

The name Isaac means “laughter”. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham, and that covenant was going to be carried down through the line of Isaac, not Ishmael. Ishmael was the child that Abraham had when he took matters into his own hands. He was the child of works. Isaac, though, was the child that God gave to Abraham. He was a miracle – a gift given long after the days when childbearing should have been an impossibility. Isaac was the child of faith – the child that God had promised – and the Lord would make His covenant with him.

These things did not happen by accident. The book of Galatians says that there is a deeper meaning here:

**Galatians 4:22:** “For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.

23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.

25 For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.

26 But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

Ishmael represents the covenant of works, whereas Isaac represents the covenant of grace. These two covenants are at war with each other:

**Galatians 4:28:** “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.

29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.

30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.

31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.”

As Christians we are part of the covenant of grace, not the covenant of works. We have been freed from the Law and are now under grace. Jesus has kept the Law for us and given us His righteousness. We have been set free. We are not in bondage anymore.

Just as Ishmael struggled against Isaac, so the covenant of works struggles against the covenant

of grace. Those who seek to be saved by their own good deeds cannot abide those who are saved through faith in Christ. The world hates the children of the covenant of grace and persecutes them, just as Ishmael hated Isaac. It is not an accident that God identified Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, instead of the God of Abraham and Ishmael.

But the Lord was not going to forget Ishmael. Although God was not going to establish a covenant with him, He did promise to turn him into a great nation:

**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.”

We have already seen that God kept that promise, so we won't repeat those verses here. However, even though God would make Ishmael into a great nation, He was going to establish His covenant with Isaac:

**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.

22 And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.”

Abraham had many descendents, but not all of them were a part of the covenant. God made His covenant with Isaac, not Ishmael, and with Jacob, not Esau. His promises were made to a specific line – to the people that we call the Jews.

As soon as God left, Abraham did exactly what the Lord had commanded:

**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.

24 And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

26 In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

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

Notice that Abraham did not wait even a single day; instead he carried out the commandment immediately. This was very characteristic of Abraham. When the Lord commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham rose up early the next day to do so. He didn't delay; instead he obeyed. Abraham had many faults, but when the Lord told him to do something he always did it immediately, without argument or debate.

As we can see, the Lord promised to give Abraham a son, and he would call his name Isaac. That is exactly what happened. The Lord always keeps His promises.