

## Genesis, Part 16

Last session we saw Abram and his wife Sarai hatch a plan that could only go badly – and it did. Both were old and well past the child-bearing age. Neither could see how God could give them a promised child that would be the beginning of numerous progeny whose number would be uncountable as the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth. The promise had been made and years passed with no fulfillment. They lost faith in God’s ability to solve the problem and decided to create a solution of their own. It was really Sarai’s idea that Abram “go into” her handmaiden Hagar and father a child through her. She met no resistance from Abram. Read into that what you will.

What seemed like a good idea in planning turned out to be not much of a good idea in execution. Hagar did get pregnant and then lorded that over her mistress, creating tension in the household, tension enough that Sarai went to her husband and complained. She blamed Abram and demanded he do something about it. He passed the problem right back to Sarai and told her she had to deal with it. She did, and when Hagar couldn’t take the abuse from her mistress anymore, she ran away to return to Egypt.

Along the way she encountered the Lord, and He ordered her to return to the household of Abram. He then made a covenant with her. The Lord promised her that the child in her womb would father many people and many kings. His name would be Ishmael, but he was not to be the son of the Abrahamic Covenant. Of course, we know that Ishmael was the father of the Arab nations.

### The Covenant of Circumcision

**Genesis 17:1** 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, <sup>2</sup> that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and

I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.”

There is a thirteen-year gap between Genesis 16 and 17 when God was silent. Meanwhile, Abram and Sarai remained without a child that would be the beginning of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, a promise that seemed ever more impossible as the years passed. Those years of divine silence may have been intended as chastisement to Abram, now called Abraham, for his participation in Sarai’s scheme. Abraham was ninety-nine when the Lord appeared to him once again. Like chapter 15, Genesis 17 focuses on the institution and confirmation of the covenant. The chapter is full of promise.

Chapter 17 records:

1. God’s assurance of His promises by changing the names of Abram (vv. 1–8) and Sarai (vv. 15–18),
2. God’s instituting circumcision as the sign of the covenant (vv. 9–14), God’s sure word on the promises’ fulfillment through Sarah (vv. 19–22), and
3. Abraham’s compliance (vv. 23–27).

In this appearance, the Lord identified himself as *El Shaddai*. The derivation and meaning of *shaddai* are uncertain, but “the Almighty” seems to be the best translation, thus we have “God Almighty”. This name of God characterized the patriarchal period. It emphasized the power of God in working out his plan in the lives of his people (17:1). No obstacle could stand in the way of the complete fulfillment of the word of promise.

Before God renewed his commitment to Abraham, he asked for a renewed commitment on the part of his servant, “walk before me, and be blameless” (v. 1). This seems to be an admonishment for Abraham’s previous failures of faith and efforts at human viewpoint solutions rather than a condition of fulfillment. The Lord had previously stated in Genesis 12:1-3 through the repeated use of the unconditional “I will...” that the covenant depended

solely on Him. The key to that understanding is found in the phrasing “for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God” (v 8) The “everlasting possession” can only refer to Israel possessing the land during the Kingdom. Only then will the possession of the land be “everlasting”. That is supported by the second phrase that God “will be their God”. Only in the Kingdom will that be unconditionally true.

These two imperatives that are identified must be met before fulfillment of the covenant can begin:

1. Walk before the Lord, i.e., live a circumspect life that would meet with divine approval. God graciously condescends to talk with those whom he takes into covenant and communion with himself. He talks with them by his *word* (Prov. 6:22). He talks with them by his *Spirit* (Jn. 14:26). A heart free of unconfessed sin is required to have this kind of fellowship with God. This applied then as well as today.
2. He must be blameless, i.e., be upright and sincere (17:2). Those who are admitted into fellowship with God are, and must be, very humble and very reverent in their approaches to him. If we say we have fellowship with him and the familiarity breeds contempt, we deceive ourselves. Those who would receive comfort from God must set themselves to give glory to God.

God only works with and through those who have a covenant relationship with Him *and* are in a “walking” condition of fellowship (Gal 5:16). As for those not in this fellowship, God is limited to chastising them to encourage them back into that intimate personal relationship of faith.

Commandment was followed by promise. God would make (lit., give), i.e., fix, appoint, or confirm, a covenant with Abraham. The reference is to the covenant which God had made with Abraham some twenty-four years earlier. Though Abraham had at this time only one son, the essence of God’s covenant with him was that he would have many descendants.

Abraham responded to the appearance of the Lord and the tremendous implications of his words with humble reverence. He fell on his face before his God (17:2–3).

The patriarch's name change was crucial. The name Abram (17:5), meaning "exalted father," harked back to Terah (11:27) and implied that Abram came from royal lineage. But in Hebrew, the name Abraham (*'abrāhām*) sounds similar to "father of a multitude" (*'ab hāmôn*) of nations (17:4–5). His new name implied a look ahead to his descendants.

One can well imagine that Abraham was hurt by the suppressed smiles on the faces of his men when he told them to call him Abraham, meaning the father of a multitude of nations—when he was 99 years old. Yet Abraham knew that God had not deceived him. His new name and his wife's new name were perpetual reminders of God's sure word. Every time someone addressed him he would recall God's promise, until finally Isaac, the child of promise, would call him "abba" (father).

Five new elements appear in this amplification of the covenant details.

1. Abram was to be the father, not of one nation through Ishmael, but of many nations. To commemorate this aspect of the promise, Abram was to change his name to Abraham (17:4–5). The new name universalized Abraham's experience for he is to be the father of many nations.
2. Not only nations, but kings would come from the loins of Abraham (17:6). Later prophecies identify one of those kings as the anointed one, the Messiah.
3. God's special covenant relationship with Abraham would continue throughout the generations of his descendants. The covenant was an "everlasting covenant" (*berit 'olam*), literally a covenant enduring to the far distant future.
4. The essence of the covenant was summed up in the promise to be the God of Abraham and his descendants after him. Besides gifts of grace which he pours out, God gives himself freely to his people (17:7).
5. Though Abraham had been for almost a quarter of a century a "stranger" in the land, God would give to him and his descendants all the land of Canaan. The land would be for them "an everlasting possession" (*'achuzzat 'olam*), i.e., one which would extend into the distant future (17:8).

## The Sign

**Gen 17:9** And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.  
<sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.  
<sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

God establishes a new covenant with Abraham, the Covenant of Circumcision, which is to be a sign of their special relationship with God. It also has symbolic significance, as we shall see.

Abraham would be the father of many people and many nations. Abraham’s descendants would indeed occupy the land after the Exodus though not all of it – and they would get booted out three times after that. Those occupations of the land then and today are only partial fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant. The ultimate fulfillment is yet future.

We have been calling the Abrahamic Covenant an “unconditional covenant,” that is one-sided, and ultimate fulfillment depends entirely on the “I will...” of God (Gen 17:6, 7, 8, 9). The covenant is “everlasting” (vv. 7, 9, 19), meaning it has no end and fulfillment is guaranteed. Yet here, it looks like God is placing conditions on it: circumcision (v. 10) and that they and their offspring after them should keep His covenant (v. 9). This looks like a condition placed on the covenant. What gives?

The key is in verse 11 “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” This is new. It symbolizes the relationship that God has already established with

Abraham through the Abrahamic Covenant and with his seed. It is a requirement for that ongoing relationship.

### **What About Circumcision?**

1. Circumcision was a bloody ordinance; for all things by the law were purged with blood (Heb. 9:22. See Ex. 24:8). But with the blood of Christ being shed, all bloody ordinances are now abolished; circumcision as a sign therefore gives way to baptism to demonstrate relationship.
2. It was peculiar to the males, though the women were also included in the covenant, for the man is the head of the woman. Some think that the blood of the males only was shed in circumcision because it pictured Jesus Christ and his blood.
3. It was the flesh of the foreskin that was to be cut off because it is by ordinary generation that sin is propagated, and with an eye to the promised seed, who was to come from the loins of Abraham. Christ had not yet offered himself for us, God would have man to enter into covenant by the offering of some part of his own body. God put this honor upon a secret part of the body, an uncomely part (1 Co. 12:23-24), for *the true circumcision is that of the heart*.
4. The ordinance was to be administered to children when they were eight days old, and not sooner, that they might gather some strength, to be able to undergo the pain of it, and that at least one sabbath might pass over them. The eighth day symbolizes resurrection. Circumcision of the *heart* is required for entrance into the Kingdom.
5. The children of the strangers, of whom the master of the family was the true domestic owner, were to be circumcised (v. 12, 13), which looked forward to the Gentiles, who would in due time be brought into the family of Abraham, by faith (Gal. 3:14).
6. The religious observance of this institution was required under a very severe penalty (Gen 17:14). The contempt of circumcision was a contempt of the covenant; if the parents did not circumcise their children, it was at their peril, as in the case of Moses (Ex. 4:24, 25). Concerning those that were not circumcised in their infancy, if, when they grew up, they did not themselves come under this ordinance, God would surely reckon with them. If they did not cut off the flesh of their foreskin, God would cut them off from their people. It is a

dangerous thing to make light of divine institutions and to live in neglect of them.

So cutting off the foreskin of the male child on the eighth day symbolizes the removal of the corruption of the “flesh” – sin and a temporal foreshadowing of what will be required for entrance into the Kingdom and ultimate glory, the circumcision of the heart, the sign of a redeemed believer.

**Deut 30:6** And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

We should also understand that what we are seeing here is a covenant within a covenant. The conditional aspects of circumcision relate to one portion of the main unconditional Abrahamic Covenant, the occupation of the land by Abraham and his offspring in time versus eternity. God promised the land to Abraham’s seed. The ultimate fulfillment of that takes place in the Kingdom Age, but until then, occupancy of the land is conditioned on obedience. This conditioned occupation seen here is a foreshadowing of the Palestinian Covenant, which conditions Israel’s (Abraham’s seed) occupation of the land until ultimate fulfillment in the Kingdom. This portion of the Abrahamic Covenant is detailed in Deuteronomy 28-30.

**Deut 28:64** “And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.

This is a promise of discipline if Israel fails to be obedient to God’s ordinances. Historically, we have seen three instances of Abraham’s seed being kicked out of the land because of disobedience, the last instance in AD70. Even if they are removed from the land, they still own it, because God has given it to them, and He will return them to it.

**Deut 30:1** And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return to

the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>3</sup> then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

### **The Contents of the Covenant**

It is a covenant of promises, exceedingly great and precious promises. Here are two which are all-sufficient:

1. That God would be their God, (v. 7, 8). All the privileges of the covenant, all its joys, and all its hopes are summed up in this.
2. That Canaan should be their everlasting possession, v. 8. God had before promised this land to Abraham and his seed, ch. 15:18. But here, where it is promised for an everlasting possession, surely it must be looked upon as a type of heaven's happiness, that everlasting rest which remains for the people of God, (Heb. 4:9). This is that "better country" to which Abraham had an eye, and that God would be to them a God; so that, if God had not prepared and designed this, he would have been ashamed to be called their God, (Heb. 11:16). Canaan is here said to be the land wherein Abraham was a stranger; and the heavenly Canaan is a land to which we are all strangers.

Circumcision was the token of the covenant, for which the covenant is itself called the covenant of circumcision (Acts 7:8). It is said to be the covenant which Abraham and his seed must keep, as a copy or counterpart, v. 9, 10. It is called a sign and seal in Romans 4:11, for it was:

1. A confirmation to Abraham and his seed of those promises which were God's part of the covenant, assuring them that they should be fulfilled, that in due time Canaan would be theirs: and the continuance of this ordinance, after Canaan was theirs, intimates that these promises looked further to another Canaan, which they must still be in expectation of. (Heb. 4:8)
2. An obligation upon Abraham and his seed to that duty which was their part of the covenant; not only to the duty of accepting the covenant and consenting to it, and putting away the corruption of the flesh (which were more immediately and primarily signified by circumcision), that is the observance of all God's commands, for



circumcision made men *debtors to do the whole law*, (Gal. 5:3). Those who will have God to be to them a God must consent and resolve to be to him a people.

Nowhere does the OT teach that circumcision saves a man. It is the outward symbol of the covenant between God and men. It was to remind them of the inward circumcision of the heart that accompanies true salvation.

**Deut 30:6** And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

**Jer 4:4** Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

**Rom 4:9** Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. <sup>10</sup> How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. <sup>11</sup> He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, <sup>12</sup> and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The ritual was to be performed on the eighth day (v. 12), and significantly, eight is the number of resurrection. Sad to say, the Jews depended on the fleshly ritual and not the inner reality (Acts 15:5). Believers today are in the New Covenant and are the true circumcision (Phil. 3:1–3), which is experienced spiritually through the death of Christ (Col. 2:9–15). The entire body of sin (the old nature) has been put off, and we may live in the Spirit, not in the flesh.

## **Sarai Gets a New Name**

**Gen 17:15** And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> 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.” <sup>17</sup> 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?” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

For the first time, God specifically announced that Sarai was yet to become a mother. God announced that Sarai was to be called Sarah. This new name, though involving only a slight change and meaning “princess,” was fitting for one whose seed would produce kings (v. 16; cf. v. 6).

Hearing this, Abraham laughed because it seemed incredible that a barren 90-year-old woman could give birth to a son. His laugh was one of joy.

In this period of Bible history, procreation at these ages was indeed a miracle. Abraham had assumed that his descendants would come through Ishmael, and his joy was mitigated a bit, however, by his concern about Ishmael. If Sarah was to have a child, what would become of Ishmael? How would he fit into God’s plan? In a beautiful fatherly prayer for his boy, Abraham presented his petition that Ishmael might live forever before the Lord (17:18).

## **Isaac’s Birth Promised**

**Gen 17:19** 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. <sup>20</sup> As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

<sup>22</sup> When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

He asked God that the blessings promised to himself might extend to Ishmael (17:18). God's response is as curious as it is firm: "I will bless him ... But My covenant I will establish with Isaac" (17:20–21). God decided that Isaac, and not Ishmael, would be the father of the chosen people—the descendants of Abram! Isaac would later have to believe in God as his father had done.

Before answering his petition regarding Ishmael, God focused the attention of Abraham on the child yet to be born. This son of Sarah was named by God. The name Isaac means "laugh" and it commemorated Abraham's joyous response to the news of his birth. His name would be a constant reminder that a word from God was laughed at. God's everlasting covenant would be established through Isaac and his descendants after him.

What about Ishmael? God heard the prayer of his servant. He promised to bless Ishmael with fruitfulness and cause him to multiply exceedingly. Ishmael was not forgotten, however, for God said he would have many descendants also. Even the number of Ishmael's sons—12—was predicted. Their names are recorded in 25:13–15. Twelve princes would come from his loins and his descendants would become a great nation. The covenant, however, would be with Isaac. Then came the greatest news of all. The miraculous birth would take place the very next year (17:20–21).

The verbal revelation to Abraham ended when "God went up from him" (17:22). This expression indicates that the "appearance" of God involved something that was externally visible – a theophany.

**Gen 17:23** Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. <sup>24</sup> Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup> And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. <sup>27</sup> And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

However, Abraham, having received God's word about Isaac, immediately obeyed God's command about circumcision, thus reflecting his faith in God's word. Abraham was circumcised at the age of 99, Ishmael at 13, and every male in the patriarch's household, whether born there or bought from a foreigner, was also circumcised.

## **What is faith?**

Despite Abram's folly, we can learn a great deal from him regarding faith. What is faith? What is it not? We have already begun to see some answers in Genesis 15–16, and we will see some more as we continue into chapters 17 and 18.

### **Faith Is a Response to God's Word**

Faith was not Abraham working up, in himself, some confidence that God was going to bless him. Regrettably, that is how faith is often portrayed in our day—a quality worked up in an individual who is “believing God” for some windfall of his or her imagination. We see this, especially in the false “prosperity gospel” some churches are teaching today. That is not what we see in the account of Abraham (ch. 15). He didn't decide that, if he would just believe hard enough, God would give him a son. On the contrary, the whole thing was God's idea. Abraham simply responded to the promise of God. Abraham simply took God at his word. The lesson? If we desire more faith, we ought to get ourselves more familiar with God's Word! Faith is a response to God's Word! It is only as good as the object you place it in.

### **Faith Is Not Perfection**

Abraham proves in chapter 16 that a person can be a true believer and still really blow it! That is not to excuse our sins. But it is to say that our faith—and, ultimately, our salvation—rests not on our performance, but on God's promise. God is the object of our trust. And since he doesn't change, we may continue to trust him, even though we vacillate.

### **Faith Never Gives Up**

When Abraham was seventy-five (12:1–3), God had promised to make him into a great nation and to bless all the families of the earth through his descendants. But when chapter 17 opens, Abraham is ninety-nine years

old and has almost nothing to show for all the promises God had made—only a thirteen-year-old illegitimate son. Yet Abraham trusted God for each of these twenty-four years! So, if you've been waiting for what seems like a long time for God to answer your prayers, here is hope from Genesis 17:1–8: God never forgets his people or his promises! “I will multiply you exceedingly” (v. 2); “You will be the father of a multitude of nations” (v. 4); “I will make you exceedingly fruitful” (v. 6); “kings will come forth from you” (v. 6). “I will do what I said I would do,” says the Lord. Abraham believed. And faith keeps believing even when God seems slow to deliver. Faith never gives up!

### **Faith Results in Change**

In chapter 17, both Abram and Sarai had their names changed by God himself. Abram (“exalted father”) became Abraham (“father of a multitude”). And Sarai became Sarah, which means “princess”. Why did God change their names? As a symbol of their changed status! Abraham was now living under God’s covenant blessings. And Sarah was now God’s princess, destined to be the mother of Israel! They had gone from barren to blessed. And, in the ancient context in which they lived, such a change called for new names.

Now, in most modern cultures, we do not change our names when we become believers in Jesus. But our status is no less changed than was Abraham’s or Sarah’s. We, too, have gone from barren to blessed. We have gone from being guilty to being innocent; from being God’s enemies to being his friends; and from being disobedient sinners to being saints with the capacity and desire to obey God!

### **Faith is Demonstrated by Obedience**

James the brother of Jesus made this point quite well when he said that “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17), and claimed, “I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18). Faith and works are not synonymous. But good works are the inevitable result of true faith. Good works do not produce salvation, but good works are the product of salvation. And Abraham illustrates this. In 17:9–14, God declared that the sign of his covenant with Abraham would be that Abraham should circumcise all the males in his house. Easy for us to say, since, in our modern, health-related practice of circumcision, we do the deed right at

birth, leaving no memory of the pain. But Abraham, remember, was ninety-nine years old, his son was thirteen, and his servants were all grown men. To circumcise them all would not be an easy task. But this was what God asked. So Abraham faced a test. Would he really trust God, even when it was difficult? Would he prove his faith by obeying the God in whom he supposedly trusted? Yes, he would (17:23). Abraham did just “as God had said”! He demonstrated his faith by obedience. And so must we!

Abraham was a man of faith! He believed God when the promise seemed impossible. He believed God even when his wife laughed (18:1–15). He got back on track after a momentary lapse in judgment. And he demonstrated that he trusted God by practical obedience. May God give us grace to do the same!

Faith is a human response to the Word of God. God says “X” and I believe Him; not only do I believe He IS CAPABLE of producing X, but I believe He WILL Produce X. Such faith will produce the “works” seen in James.

**Eph 2:10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.