

GENESIS

Chapter 17

Abraham and the Covenant of Circumcision

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.” 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. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 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, 13 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. 14 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.”

17:1 *ninety-nine years old.* Thirteen years had passed since Ishmael’s birth (see 16:16; 17:24-25). (CSB)

It was now twenty-four years since God had first appeared to Abram with the promise that he would be the ancestor of the Savior. Humanly speaking, every shred of hope they had of ever becoming parents had been swept away. Martin Luther once made the statement: “It’s God’s way to empty a man first before filling him with His blessing.” (PBC)

Abram is now ninety-nine years old and received the promise twenty-four years earlier that God would make of him a great nation (Gen 12:2). Sarai is now eighty-nine years old. Both Abram and Sarai would laugh at the prospect of having a child at their age (Gen 17:17; 18:12). Since God had not provided a son since the promise of Gen 12:2, Abram and Sarai had taken matters into their own hands, and Ishmael was already thirteen years old (Gen 17:24–25). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

God Almighty. The Hebrew (*El-Shaddai*) perhaps means “God, the Mountain One,” either highlighting the invincible power of God or referring to the mountains as God’s symbolic home (see Ps 121:1). It was the special name by which God revealed himself to the patriarchs (see Ex 6:3). *Shaddai* occurs 31 times in the book of Job and 17 times in the rest of the Bible. (CSB)

The God who here appeared with good news for Abram is the God who can compel even nature to do His bidding. (PBC)

walk before me and be blameless. Perhaps equivalent to “walk with me and be blameless.” After Abram’s and Sarai’s attempt to obtain the promised offspring by using a surrogate mother, God appeared to Abram. The Lord made it clear that, if Abram was to receive God’s promised and covenanted benefits, he must be God’s faithful and obedient servant. His faith must be accompanied by the “obedience that comes from faith” (Ro 1:5; see ch. 22). (CSB)

Luther: “What else did God want than that Abraham should continue in the righteousness and faith because of which he had been declared righteous and that he should be uncorrupted, blameless, and perfect?” (AE 3:78). (TLSB)

“Perfect” (tamim), of course, involves not complete moral perfection; but since it involves the idea of “complete” and “sound,” it implies that no vital feature of a godly life is absent. Such a demand does not ask Abram to make himself fit to receive divine blessings, but it does warn him against doing those things whereby he renders himself unfit. (Leupold)

17:2 my covenant. See 12:2–3; 13:14–16; 15:4–5. The covenant is God’s. God calls it “my covenant” nine times in vv. 2–21, and he initiates (see 15:18), confirms (v. 2) and establishes (v. 7) it. (CSB)

God’s blessings and promises are always new. He had already made His covenant with Abram. He added a name (v. 5) and a sign (vv 10-11) by which Abram is to be sure that the original promise has not been forgotten. (TLSB)

Nine times throughout these verses God speaks of “my covenant” (*bərithi*), emphasizing God as the one who establishes the covenant, sets its conditions, and brings blessings that are his alone to bestow. In setting these conditions, God adds new detail to what had previously been promised to Abraham. First, this is to be an everlasting covenant *bərith ‘olam*, v 7), not a temporary covenant. The benefits and blessings of this covenant would last eternally for Abram, Sarai, and their descendants. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

In addition, it was a personal covenant with Israel to be their God—“to be God (*lə’lohim*) to you and to your offspring after you” (v 7). God simply and graciously chose Abram and Sarai, along with their descendants, to be the recipients of this covenant. It was nothing that Abram or Sarai did that made them “worthy” of this covenant. At its very core, it is God’s promise “to be God to you and to your offspring after you” that exists as pure Gospel. It is repeated throughout the Old Testament (Jer 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 34:30–31; Hos 2:23). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

Abram is predicted by God to become “the father of a multitude of nations” (v 4), and in v 6 God says, “I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.” Likewise, concerning Sarai, God says to Abraham, “I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (v 16). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

Putting all of these aspects of the covenant together, there are certainly immediate fulfillments in the Old Testament as the line of Abraham and Sarah produces both nations and kings. (See also Gen 35:11; 47:27; 48:19; Ex 1:7; Matthew 1.) (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

Yet there is a more significant fulfillment in the most notable descendant, the Christ (Matthew 1). Through his life, death, and resurrection, everlasting life in the presence of God is purchased for all. The promise to have nations as descendants is reflected in Christ’s command to go and make

disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19–20) and is ultimately fulfilled in people from all nations being grafted (*ek pisteōs Abraam*) into the seed of Abraham (Rom 4:11–18; 15:8–12; Gal 3:29; Rev 7:9; 21:24). (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

The Pharisees believed that Abraham as their father (physical lineage) meant they were secure in their standing with God. Jesus quickly dispelled them of that misconception (Lk 3:7–9; Jn 8:39ff). Just as Christ condemns the Pharisees, saying they were of their father, the devil (Jn 8:44), so also all human beings since the fall hail from a lineage of death (Rom 5:12). Through Christ, we, the righteous, “reign in life” (Rom 5:17)! (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 22, Part 2)

multitude of nations. See 13:16 and note. Earlier God had covenanted to keep his promise concerning the land (ch. 15); here he broadens his covenant to include the promised offspring. See chart on “Major Covenants in the OT”. (CSB)

17:5 *Abram ... Abraham.* The first name means “Exalted Father,” probably in reference to God (i.e., “[God is] Exalted Father”); the second means “father of many,” in reference to Abraham. (CSB)

“Abram” means “exalted father,” but “Abraham” means “father of many nations.” God added a new name to the patriarch, that by it he might be ever mindful of the promise. (TLSB)

your name shall be. By giving Abram a new name (see Ne 9:7) God marked him in a special way as his servant (see notes on 1:5; 2:19). (CSB)

17:6 *nations ... kings.* This promise came also to Sarah (v. 16) and was renewed to Jacob (35:11; see 48:19). It referred to the proliferation of Abraham’s offspring, who, like the descendants of Noah (see ch. 10), would someday become many nations and spread over the earth. Ultimately it finds fulfillment in such passages as Ro 4:16–18; 15:8–12; Gal 3:29; Rev 7:9; 21:24. (CSB)

17:7 *everlasting.* From God’s standpoint (see vv. 13, 19), but capable of being broken from man’s standpoint (see v. 14; cf. Isa 24:5; Jer 31:32). (CSB)

Lasting in Christ Jesus, who sent forth His apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). In Christ, the promise God gave to Abraham extends to all nations. (TLSB)

to be God to you. The heart of God’s covenant promise, repeated over and over in the OT (see, e.g., v. 8; Jer 24:7; 31:33; Eze 34:30–31; Hos 2:23; Zec 8:8). This is God’s pledge to be the protector of his people and the One who provides for their well-being and guarantees their future blessing (see 15:1). (CSB)

God is not merely the Almighty; He is the Almighty for His people, i.e., for their life, forgiveness, and salvation. (TLSB)

17:8 *land.* See 12:7; 15:18; Ac 7:5. (CSB)

everlasting possession.† The land, though an everlasting possession given by God, could be lost because of disobedience (see Dt 28:62–63; 30:1–10). (CSB)

Temporal promise of land was fulfilled when God gave His OT people their inheritance in Canaan. True Israel is no longer merely of earthly lineage, but includes those who are true sons of Abraham in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:7). Their true citizenship is not of this earth but in heaven (Phil. 3:20), even as was Abraham's citizenship (Heb. 11:10). (TLSB)

17:9 *As for you.* Balances the “As for me” of v. 4. Having reviewed his covenanted commitment to Abraham (see 15:8–21), and having broadened it to include the promise of offspring, God now called upon Abraham to make a covenanted commitment to him—to “walk before me and be blameless” (v. 1). (CSB)

keep my covenant. † Participation in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant was conditioned on obedience that comes from faith (see 18:19; 22:18; 26:4–5). (CSB)

17:10 *circumcised.* † Circumcision was God's appointed “sign of the covenant” (v. 11), which signified Abraham's covenanted commitment to the Lord—that the Lord alone would be his God, whom he would trust and serve. It symbolized a self-maledictory oath (analogous to the oath to which God had submitted himself; see note on 15:17): “If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring (see v. 14) as I have cut off my foreskin.” Thus Abraham was to place himself under the rule of the Lord as his King, consecrating himself, his offspring and all he possessed to the service of the Lord. Other nations also practiced circumcision (see Jer 9:25–26; Eze 32:18–19), but not for the covenant reasons that Israel did. (CSB)

By removal of the foreskin, males received a visible sign (v. 11) of God's promise to send a Savior, born of the woman (Gal. 4:4–5). No Hebrew male could live a day without being reminded of the promise God had made long before, and every conjugal act between a husband and wife would illustrate the hope that God was working to restore creation and redeem all people. Finally, the shedding of blood pointed to our final redemption by the shedding of Christ's blood. (TLSB)

During the wilderness journey circumcision fell into disuse. This neglect is most satisfactorily explained as follows: The nation, while bearing the punishment of disobedience in its wanderings was regarded as under temporary rejection by God, and was therefore prohibited from using the sign of the covenant. (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

As the Lord had only promised His assistance on condition that the law given by Moses was faithfully observed, it became the duty of Joshua, upon entering Canaan, to perform the rite of circumcision upon the generation that had been born in the wilderness. This was done, immediately upon crossing the Jordan, at or near Gilgal (Josh. 5:2). (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

It secured to the one subjected to it all the rights of the covenant, participation in all its material and spiritual benefits; while on the other hand, he was bound to fulfill all the covenant obligations. It was not, however, a sacramental nature; it was not a vehicle through which to convey the sanctifying influences of God to His people, but was simply a token of the recognition of the covenant relation existing between Israel and God. (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

Circumcision was practiced by the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and the Egyptians, but among the last only by the priests and those who wanted to be initiated into the sacred mysteries. The practice has also been found to exist among the Ethiopians, Colchians, Congo Negroes, and many savage tribes in the heart of Africa; also among American Indian tribes, e.g., the Salivas,

the Guamos, the Octamotos on the Orinoco, among the inhabitants of Yucatan and of Mexico, and, further, among the Fiji Islanders. (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

It was practiced, say some, because of its medical advantages, as the warding of disease through ease in cleanliness, or that it served to increase the generative powers, but these can hardly be received as proper explanations, for whole nations not practicing circumcision appear as healthy and fruitful. Nor can the rite be brought into connection with the idea of sacrifice, "the consecration of a part of the body for the whole," or even "as an act of emasculation in honor of the Deity, that has gradually dwindled down to the mere cutting away of the foreskin." (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

17:11 *sign of the covenant.*† As the covenant sign, circumcision also marked Abraham as the one to whom God had made covenant commitment (15:7–21) in response to Abraham's faith, which he "credited ... to him as righteousness" (15:6). Paul comments on this aspect of the covenant sign in Ro 4:11. (CSB)

Pledge or token – something that does not have to exist for itself, but points to something greater. The Word, not the mere removal of flesh from the body, was the chief thing in circumcision. (TLSB)

17:12 *eight days old.* See 21:4 and Ac 7:8 (Isaac); Lk 1:59 (John the Baptist); 2:21 (Jesus); Php 3:5 (Paul). Abraham was 99 years old when the newly initiated rite of circumcision was performed on him (see v. 24). The Arabs, who consider themselves descendants of Ishmael, are circumcised at the age of 13 (see v. 25). For them, as for other peoples, it serves as a rite of transition from childhood to manhood, thus into full participation in the community. (CSB)

Such infant circumcision points to God's inclusion of His people in the covenant promise even at a tender age. It also anticipated when circumcision would end and Baptism would become the sign of the new covenant (Col. 2:11-12). God finished the work of the original creation on the sixth day, and on the seventh He rested. The eighth day represented a new beginning. Christ finished the work of the new creation by redeeming us with His blood on the sixth day, Good Friday. On the Sabbath, He rested in the tomb. On Easter Sunday, Christ arose, starting the new creation on what may be referred to as the "eighth day." (TLSB)

The circumcision of the child on the eighth day seems to have been founded on the significance that attached to the number seven, so far as that number denotes a period of time. On the eighth day, when a new cycle of life began, the child entered into covenant with God. Again, it was not until the eighth day that the child was supposed to possess an independent existence. (Unger's Bible Dictionary)

17:13 *in your flesh* – Physical sign illustrated the blood basis of the covenant (15:8-10) and its intensely personal character. (TLSB)

17:14 *cut off from his people.* Removed from the covenant people by divine judgment. (CSB)

To refuse the sign of the covenant displayed unbelief. Instead of losing a piece of skin, the entire person would be cut off from God's covenant people and from the promise. (TLSB)

17:1–14 Abraham receives both a new name and the sign of the covenant promise God had given His people. The Lord received the same sign of circumcision, shedding His infant blood and receiving the name "Jesus," proving Himself to be our dear Savior. • Lord, lead us to treasure the

precious Word and Sacraments, which mark and sign us as Your beloved children. Amen.
(TLSB)

Isaac's Birth Promised

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. 20 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. 21 But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” 22 When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. 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. 24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old 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 That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. 27 And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

17:15 *Sarai ... Sarah.* Both names evidently mean “princess.” The renaming stressed that she was to be the mother of nations and kings (see v. 16) and thus to serve the Lord’s purpose (see note on v. 5). (CSB)

17:16 *I will bless her* – As God blessed Adam and Eve, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply” (1:28). (TLSB)

son. Fulfilled in Isaac (see 21:2–3). (CSB)

become nations – Ultimately fulfilled by our Lord as He made disciples of all nations through Baptism and teaching (Mt. 28:19-20). (TLSB)

17:17 *laughed.* In temporary disbelief (see 18:12; cf. Ro 4:19–21). The verb is a pun on the name “Isaac,” which means “he laughs.” (CSB)

He prostrated himself in worship and laughter, perhaps in disbelief for joy (cf. Lk. 24:41), or because faith and unbelief often go together in sinners (cf. Mt. 28:17; Mk. 9:24). Likely it seems unreasonable to him that he and Sarah should have a child at their age (18:12). (TLSB)

Mark 9:24, “Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

17:18 Abraham wrongly believed that Ishmael was the child of promise. This still seemed not only reasonable to him but perhaps also preferable to fathering a child with Sarah at such an old age. (TLSB)

17:19 *call him Isaac* – Isaac mean “he laughs,” reflecting not only the incredulous laughter of Abraham but also but also that Sarah, who laughed at hearing that she would bear a son (18:12). (TLSB)

17:20 *I have blessed him* – God did not forget Ishmael, but would multiply him greatly as He had promised Hagar. (TLSB)

father of twelve rulers. Fulfilled in 25:16. (CSB)

Fulfilled in 25:13-16. Ishmael was the father of the Arabian tribes.

17:21† Paul cites the choice of Isaac (and not Ishmael) as one proof that God chooses to save by grace alone (see Ro 9:6–13). (CSB)

by this time next year. See 21:2. (CSB)

17:22 *God went up from him.* A solemn conclusion to the conversation. (CSB)

17:23 *that very day.* Abraham was characterized by prompt obedience (see note on 12:4). (CSB)

Circumcision was practiced by cultures before this time, as washings, ablutions, and meals were practiced before Moses and before Christ instituted Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Here, God takes a known practice and transforms it by the promise. (TLSB)