

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 17

17:1 *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD [Hebrew: "YHWH"]...appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty [Hebrew: "El Shaddai"]; walk before me [TAN: "Walk in My ways"] and be blameless [Hebrew: "tamim"].* (NIV)

99 Years Old

The Hebrew literally means "son of ninety-nine years", meaning Abram was in his 99th year, which places this event in the year 1877 B.C.

El Shaddai

God told Moses that He had never revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *YHWH*, but only as *El Shaddai* (EXO 6:3).

Establishment of the Covenant

This was the establishment of the covenant mentioned by Paul in GAL 3:16-17:

"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later [the giving of the law from Sinai in 1447 B.C.], does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise."

Abram's Responsibility

God now focuses on the responsibility that Abram has in the covenant which God sealed by His presence in 15:17-18. Abram had to walk in God's ways in order to remain in this blameless state ("tamim")—to remain under grace [used in 6:9 in reference to Noah]. Both Noah and Abram are pointed out as blameless because of their obedience to God. This obedience proved beyond any doubt that God's grace and resulting sanctification, though unearned, cannot be achieved by those unwilling to obey God, who scoff at the need for works.

17:2 *I will confirm [REB: "so that I may make"] My covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.* (NIV)

Abram's Descendants

The initial covenant proposed by God focused on land rights for Abram's descendants (15:18-19); He now focuses upon Abram's descendants themselves.

17:3-4 *Abram bowed low, and God went on, 'This is My covenant with you: you are to be the father of many nations.* (REB)

God's responsibility is to make certain that Abram's offspring populated nations.

17:5 *No longer will you be called Abram ["high father"]; your name will be Abraham ["father of a multitude"], for I have made you a father of many nations.* (NIV)

Abram's Renaming

God added one letter of His name, "YHWH" (Hebrew "he"), to the name Abram, symbolically giving Abram part of Himself.

17:6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. (NIV)

God's Promises

Ultimately the King of kings would come from him.

17:7 "And I will establish [TAN, REB: "maintain"] My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.

As part of His responsibility in the covenant, God promises to be God to Abraham and his descendants.

17:8 "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

God gave the land to Abraham, as well as his descendants, as an everlasting possession. But, as Paul stated in GAL 3:18, *God gave Abraham the inheritance by promise*; Abraham never received the inheritance in his lifetime.

17:9-10 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;

Sign of the Covenant

Verse 9 is a summary statement of all that the covenant includes; Verse 10 is a description of the sign of the covenant, a reminder to all of Abraham's descendants about the covenant they can have with God.

17:11 You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. (TAN)

Circumcision was a physical sign which symbolized the state of mind that Abraham already had—circumcision of the heart (ROM 2:25-29). Paul tells us that Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of the faith he had even before he was circumcised (ROM 4:11-12). This sign pictured the cutting of the covenant God made with Abraham.

17:12 For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. (NIV)

Eighth Day in God's Plan

God required circumcision on the eighth day to symbolize the time in His plan when "*all families of the earth would be blessed in Abraham*" (12:3). In the annual festivals, God established the eighth day as the Last Great Day, which pictures the future time when anyone who thirsts can come to God (LEV 23:36; JOH 7:37), and the time when Jesus is to raise up all the dead (JOH 6:37-40). The Last Great Day

represents the time when the "covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations" will be removed in the great circumcision at the time of the 2nd resurrection (ISA 25:7).

17:13 Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. (NIV)

The circumcision of the heart is for everyone, whether a physical descendant of Abraham, or anyone else who is redeemed, because all must eventually be redeemed by the blood of Christ (1PE 1:18-19).

17:14 Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant. (NIV)

At the introduction of the Passover, God stipulated that only those who had been circumcised could take part (EXO 12:43-48) in eating and drinking the body and blood of the Lamb of God. Those who were circumcised were aware that making a covenant required cutting (15:18) and blood. Unless the lamb's blood was shed, it was impossible to eat and drink.

Abraham and his descendants were required to walk in God's ways; those who refused circumcision broke their part of the covenant.

17:15 God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai ["my princess" – implying a royal relationship to one] your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah ["princess" – implying a royal relationship to many]. (NIV)

Sarai's Renaming

Just as in the case of Abraham, God adds the same letter (Heb. "he") to her name, symbolically imparting part of Himself.

17:16 "And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."

Promise through Sarah

Although God had previously revealed that Abraham would literally father a son (15:4), He had never revealed that the son would be born from Sarah, which is why Hagar had been used over 13 years earlier as a surrogate.

17:17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (NIV)

Abraham's Reaction

Abraham's reaction was not the personification of faith. It had been almost 14 years since he fathered Ishmael, and no woman of Sarah's age was bearing children at that stage in man's history.

Paul writes about Abraham's reaction in ROM 4:19 (NIV), "...he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead." Also, in HEB 11:12 (PHLP), "...from one man, who as a potential father was already considered dead."

17:18 He said to God, 'If only Ishmael might enjoy Your special favour!' (REB)

Abraham's Assumption

God had not told Abraham that Ishmael would not become Abraham's heir, Abraham had simply assumed that to be the case.

17:19 Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac [Hebrew: "yishaq" = "laugh" or "laughter"]; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.

Isaac's Naming

God named Abraham's son based upon his reaction to God's statement that Sarah would be the mother of his son.

17:20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. (NIV)

"Twelve Rulers"

Just as the twelve sons of Israel were different in character traits, the twelve sons of Ishmael would have different attributes, forming different groups or tribes, but would racially be one great nation.

17:21 "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

Son of Promise

Paul says that this verse is the "*word of promise*" (ROM 9:9) that made Isaac the son of promise.

17:22-23 When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. (NIV)

Abraham's Faith

Once again Abraham's obedience to what God told him to do is pointed out, emphasizing the statement about Abraham, "*by works was faith made perfect*" (JAS 2:22).

17:24-27 Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen; Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him. (NIV)

Time Frame

Some tradition places this event at the time of the Passover in Abraham's 99th year. One year later, to the day, Isaac would be born.