

GENESIS 17 – GOD REAFFIRMS THE COVENANT

A. Ok just how did God appear to Abram. Was it like Hagar's Angel of the Lord? It says The LORD appeared to Abram. How do we understand that in today's terms. Let's have a look at the passage.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

- a. **When Abram was ninety-nine years old:** Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4). He was 86 years old when the son Ishmael was born of Hagar, the servant girl (Genesis 16:15-16). He had waited some 25 years for the fulfilment of God's promise to give a son through Sarai. It had been some 13 years since his last recorded word from God. He was getting a bit sick of waiting.
- b. **I am Almighty God:** God's first words to Abram made an introduction and a declaration of His being. By this name *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), God revealed His Person and character to Abram. However, there is some debate as to what exactly the name *El Shaddai* means.
 - i. Kidner: "A traditional analysis of the name is 'God (*el*) who (*sa*) is sufficient (*day*).'"
 - ii. Clarke: "*El shaddai, I am God all-sufficient; from shadah, to shed, to pour out. I am that God who pours out blessings, who gives them richly, abundantly, continually.*"
 - iv. Leupold explained that *Shaddai* comes from the root *shadad*, which means "to display power."
 - v. The Septuagint – a translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek before the time of Jesus – translates **Almighty** with the Greek word *pantokrator*, the "One who has His hand on everything."I think all these definitions give us the idea.
- d. **Walk before Me and be blameless:** After the proclamation of His name *El Shaddai*, God then told Abram what was expected of him. It was first revelation and then expectation.

Note here that the word **blameless** literally means “whole.” God wanted *all* of Abram, a total commitment.

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

i. The last time we are told the LORD communicated with Abram directly was some 13 years before (Genesis 16:15-16). Seemingly, Abram had 13 years of “normal” fellowship with God, waiting for the promise all the time. It would be understandable if, at times during those 13 years, Abram felt that God forgot His promise.

ii. “All these thirteen years, so far as Scripture informs us, Abram had not a single visit from his God. We do not find any record of his either doing anything memorable or having so much as a single audience with the Most High.” (Spurgeon) God breaks into his life again.

iii. Abram was becoming a great man of faith, but you don't make a great man of faith overnight. It takes years of God's work in them, years of almost mundane trusting in God, perhaps interrupted with a few spectacular encounters with the LORD. (So don't expect to be a great man of God or a great woman of God without God working on you!)

2. (3-8) **God refers to specific terms of the covenant**

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish 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. 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.”

a. **Abram fell on his face:** As this seems to be a direct, personal appearance of God, Abram did the proper and reverent thing; he **fell on his face**, showing submission and giving honor to God.

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

i. There was, no doubt, a sense in which **Abram**, "father of many," was a hard name to bear for a man who was the father of none, especially in a culture where inquiry about one's personal life was a courteous practice. Now, God went a step further and made his name "father of many nations." It was almost crazy for a childless man to have such a name.

ii. Think of when Abraham announced his name change to others. They must have thought he wanted to *escape* the burden of his name. Instead, he increased the ridicule.

iii. There are many wonderful name changes in the Bible, such as when God changed Jacob's name to *Israel* (Genesis 32:28), and when He changed Simon's name to *Peter* (Mark 3:16). God promises a wonderful new name to every overcomer in Him (Revelation 2:17).

iv. God gives us many names in faith (saint, righteous, chosen, royal priesthood, sons of God, and so forth), and He knows He will accomplish the meaning of the name in us – even if it seems somewhat crazy. What is God's name for you?

c. **Father of many nations... exceedingly fruitful... make nations of you, and kings shall come from you:** In almost every dimension, God made the long-delayed promise to Abraham *greater*. Never before had God specifically said that *multiple nations* would come from Abraham (a singular *nation* was promised in Genesis 12:2). Never before had God specifically said that **kings** would descend from Abraham.

d. **I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant:** God also specifically promised that the covenant He originally made with Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 would be passed to his

chosen **descendants**, those not yet born. The covenant was not only for Abram, but it was an **everlasting covenant**.

e. **I give to you and your descendants after you the land... for an**

everlasting possession: The specific promise of **the land** was made *not* only to Abraham, but also to his covenant **descendants**.

This **everlasting covenant** was just as valid for them as it was for Abraham himself. **The land** was and is God's covenant promise to the Jewish people.

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

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; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

a. **This is My covenant which you shall keep:** God introduced the command regarding circumcision with these words. The cutting and removal of the foreskin of every male among Abraham's covenant descendants would mark them as those who were in the covenant. Since this covenant was made with the literal, genetic **descendants** of Abraham through the promise of God, it was appropriate that this sign of the covenant be given to those born into the covenant and was associated with the reproductive part of their body.

i. "Circumcision indicated to Abraham that there was a defilement of the flesh in man which must for ever be taken away, or man would remain impure, and out of covenant with God.

b. **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 him that his descendants must take upon themselves a **sign of the covenant**, showing they received the covenant by faith.

c. **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 practiced among various peoples.

ii. There were undoubtedly hygienic reasons, especially making sense in the ancient world.

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.

d. **He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised:** Since the covenant descendants of Abraham are born into that covenant by their natural birth, it logically followed that the **sign of the covenant** should be given to them in their infancy.

e. 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.

f. **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).*

1. **(15-16) The promise is stated: a son will come through Sarah, whose name is changed from Sarai.**

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 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."

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. **Sarah** indicates a higher standing and status than **Sarai**.

i. "*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:** By emphasizing the word "**her**," God made it plain that this son will not come about by another surrogate-mother situation (as with Hagar and Ishmael). Sarah herself would give birth, even though it was past her time in life to do so (Sarah was about 90 years old at this time). Sarah is included in the promise.

2. **(17-18) Abraham's response to the promise.**

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

a. **Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed:** Should Abraham's laugh be seen to be one of cynical doubt or of rejoicing in something he knew was impossible by all outward appearance, but that God could perform. Think

about this: What is this reaction? How would we react in a similar circumstance?

b. **Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old:**

Abraham knew both he and Sarah were well past the time people normally have children. Yet Abraham believed, and in Romans 4:17-21, Paul wonderfully described Abraham's faith in this promise.

i. 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 could conceive of.

2. (19-22) **God repeats the promise**

Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year." Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

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 would 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. God would answer Abraham's prayer for blessing on Ishmael, making **him fruitful** and to **multiply him exceedingly**.

Nevertheless, the covenant and its promises would pass only through the son to come, the son of promise Abraham and Sarah's son.

4. (23-27) **Abraham carries out God's command of circumcision.**

So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

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**), it was *prompt* (**that very same day**), and it was *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.