

## Genesis 17

God began His relationship with Abram in 12:1-4 when Abram was 75 years old. In chapter 15, God deepened His relationship with Abram, committing Himself to a covenant with Abram (15:18). In this chapter, God will give further details of that covenant and the sign of the covenant, circumcision. There are no parallels in the ancient world with Deity making a covenant with humanity. God will also, for the first time, tell Abraham, “I will be *your* God” (17:7). This chapter is one of the fundamental chapters in the Bible relative to the relationship God begins with Abraham, at the age of 99, and his family, which becomes the nation of Israel.

### TRANSLATION - 17:1-8:

**1** It happened that Abram [was a] son of ninety-nine years and Jehovah appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk before me and be complete. **2** And I will give my covenant between me and you and I will multiply you very, very much.”

**3** Then Abram fell on his face and God spoke to him saying, **4** “I, behold, [give] my covenant with you and you will be a father of a multitude of nations. **5** And it will not be called again your name ‘Abram’ but your name will be ‘Abraham’ because a father of a multitude of nations I am giving you. **6** And I will make you fruitful, very, very much, and I will give you for nations and kings from you will go out. **7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and between your seed after you for generations for an indefinite covenant; [I will] be to you for God and your seed after you. **8** And I give to you and to your seed after you the land from your sojourning, all the land of Canaan for an indefinite possession and I will be God to them.”

### WORDS:

“El Shaddai” (verse 1; 48 times) is usually translated as “God Almighty.” The name is found most densely in Job (31 times), where it is often associated with God’s power or strength. For its use in Genesis, see 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3. “El” is the Hebrew word for “God / god.” “Shaddai” has been translated “Almighty” since the days before Christ when the LXX translated the Hebrew word with the Greek word *pantokrator*, or “All-powerful.” The Latin Vulgate followed the LXX, translating the word *omnipotens*. Since Hebrew scholars do not know the origin of the word “Shaddai,” we cannot know exactly what the term means.

“Complete” (verse 1; 91 times) was used first of Noah in 6:9 (see comments on that verse). For Noah, “complete” was an existing quality; for Abram, it is a goal. The word is often used for animal sacrifices which were perfect specimens (Exo. 12:5; 29:1; Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, etc.) “Fell” (verse 3; 435 times) is used here with “on his face” to denote a prostrate position of utter humility. Abram fell on his face because his *heart* was already “on its face” before Jehovah God. “Multitude” (verse 4; 85 times) can mean “multitude, crowd, sound, or roar.” “Nations” (567 times) was first seen back in chapter ten. Abram will become the “father” of *nations*. He will also be the father of “kings” (verse 6). The first “kings” in Scripture were listed in chapter 14. Here, God promises Abram that kings will come from him. “Covenant” is used thirteen times in this whole context. This passage is the primary text for the “Abrahamic Covenant.” “Indefinite” (verses 7, 8; 439 times) is, again, the word often translated “forever.” We know Abram’s covenant was culminated in the covenant in Jesus Christ which means it was not a *permanent* covenant. Also, consider the frequency of the word “seed” in this context (7 times). “From your sojourning” (verse 8; 11 times) is all one word, the root idea being “stranger” or “traveler.”

### GRAMMAR:

“Very, very much” (verses 2, 6, 20) repeats the adverb “very” or “exceedingly.”

### COMMENTS:

The last time Jehovah God “appeared” to Abram, the last time the verb itself is used, was in 12:7, when Abram was 75 years old. It has been 24 years since then; thirteen years since the last event in 16:16. Now, God appears to Abram to reiterate the relationship God wants to have with Abram. First, He identifies Himself as “El Shaddai,” which is generally translated as “God Almighty.” Since we do not know the origin of the word “Shaddai,” we’re not sure what aspect of God’s nature it might be emphasizing, if not His power. But, He now commands Abram to walk before Him in a complete way. In other words, God wants Abram to follow Him, to trust Him completely. Biblically speaking, there is no difference between trust or faith and following God, or obedience. Compare the description of King David in 2 Samuel 22:23-24. Count the number of verbs in 17:1-8 which have God as the subject, which point to God’s actions (“I will...”).

“Covenant” is used thirteen times just in this chapter! God had told Abram He would make a covenant with him in 15:18. Here is that covenant, perhaps the most fundamental covenant in the Bible, at least before the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. As a part of this covenant, God will multiply Abram’s family, very, very much (cf. 1:28). So, Abram responded by falling on his face because his heart was already submissive to Jehovah God, God Almighty.

God then promises Abram that Abram will, in fact, be a “father of a multitude of nations.” Abram has been concerned about having a male descendant, but God promises again that he will be a father. Based on that promise, God changes Abram’s name, which had meant “father of exaltation,” to Abraham, “father of a multitude.” In verse 6, God promises again that Abraham will be very, very fruitful (cf. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7) and nations will come from him, even kings. We see here at the very beginning that a kingship among Abraham’s descendants, a royal kingdom, was not foreign to God’s mind or plans for His people.

This covenant will be with Abraham, his family, those born in his house, and those who are foreigners who associate with Abraham. Thus, Abraham’s covenant includes, even in the beginning, non-Hebrews. We, again translate the word “indefinite” which is often translated “forever” or “permanent.” Abraham’s family will change, through the blood of Christ, from a physical entity to a spiritual entity (cf. Rom. 2:28-29). This is important to keep in mind; in verse 8, God reiterates His promise that the land of Canaan will be Abraham’s family’s for an indefinite possession, until Jesus Christ comes and establishes a spiritual covenant with a spiritual family. God will be the God of all those who walk in the faith of Abraham.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - The covenant was a promise made to Abraham and to his seed after him, an expression used six times in this chapter (verses 2, 4, 7-10, 20). Clearly, God is emphasizing that Abraham will have a son and further descendants. Again, Israel is reminded that many peoples are their cousins through their ancestors: Midianites (25:2), Ishmaelites (25:12), Edomites (36:31). God will tell Moses that He revealed Himself to the patriarchs through the name “El Shaddai” (Exo. 6:3).

*Moses’ contemporaries* - God also promised Jacob that kings would come through him (35:11). Again, God promised Judah that the “scepter” would not depart from his family (49:10; cf. Num. 24:17). Moses will bring up the subject of a kingship to the Israelites in Deut. 17:14-20.

*Later Hebrew writers* - The king who would be the ancestor of King Jesus, from the tribe of Judah of Abraham’s family, would be David (2 Samuel 7; Matthew 1:1). Nehemiah (9:7) reminds Israel of the covenant God made with Israel through Abraham, when He changed Abram’s name.

*NT writers* - Mankind, ultimately, can only be “complete” in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:28-29). Those who walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham are members of that nation of believers in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:13).

#### TRANSLATION - 17:9-14:

**9** Then God said to Abraham, “You, my covenant you will keep. You and your seed after you for generations. **10** This [is] my covenant which you will keep, between me and your sons and your seed after you, to be circumcised for you every male. **11** You all will be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it will be for a sign of the covenant between me and you all. **12** Even the son of eight days will be circumcised for you, every male, for your generations, [one] born [in] the house, and bought with silver from every son of a foreigner who [was] not from your seed, he [too]. **13** To be circumcised he will be circumcised [one] born [in] your house and bought with your silver and it will be my covenant in your flesh for an indefinite covenant. **14** Yet the uncircumcised male who will not be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul itself will be cut off from this people of the covenant, he will be destroyed.”

#### WORDS:

“Circumcised” (verse 10) is used 32 times. Many nations in that time practiced circumcision, as early as the fourth millennium. The Philistines, notoriously, did not (Judges 15:18; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36). “Foreskin” (verse 11) is used 16 times. “Uncircumcised” (verse 14; 35 times) is a related word with “foreskin.” “Destroyed” (47 times) means to “break, destroy, put an end, frustrate, or make ineffectual.”

#### GRAMMAR:

“To be circumcised he will be circumcised” (verse 13) translates the emphatic expression, a *niphal* infinitive absolute followed by the imperfect.

#### COMMENTS:

Verse 9 begins a separate part of God’s speech to Abraham. This one focuses on Abraham’s responsibility to the covenant: be circumcised. As we have noted, circumcision was practiced by most of the peoples of the ANE so it was nothing new to Abraham. However, the peoples from which he came in Mesopotamia did not practice the custom nor, famously, did the Philistines. They performed circumcision for various reasons, each suggesting the idea of some type of passage from one state to another. Here, Abraham is passing from a state outside of a covenant with God into a state of a covenant-relationship with God.

Every male should be circumcised; for those being born in Abraham’s house, they should be circumcised at eight days old. Today, we understand that the 8th day is when a baby boy’s blood will clot the quickest, so the 8th day was the safest day to practice circumcision. From that point on, the male Hebrew would daily be reminded that he was in a covenant relationship with God. That should have motivated him to stay faithful to God in all aspects of his life, including his sexual relationships. A unique aspect of Israel’s religion is that God completely separated the sexual relationship from worship, in contrast with the other Ancient Near Eastern pagan practices. The importance of the command to be circumcised is emphasized in the Hebrew text with the emphatic grammatical construction mentioned under “Grammar.” It is also emphasized in the penalty ascribed to those who refuse to be circumcised.

The penalty for not being circumcised is given in verse 14. That individual will be “destroyed” from God’s people. The Law will use this expression thirty-six times; frequently, if not entirely, it refers to the death penalty (Exo. 31:14; Lev. 18:29; 19:8; 20:3, 5, 6, 17, 18; 23:29-30; 1 Sam. 28:9; 1 Kings 11:16; Psa. 101:8; Ezek. 14:8-9).

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Abraham’s great-grandsons will use their ritual of circumcision to exact revenge on the Shechemites for raping their sister (Gen. 34).

*Moses’ contemporaries* - God will not only require Israelites to be circumcised (Exo. 12:44, 48; Lev. 12:3), but He will also require a circumcision of the heart (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6). Moses, himself, and his wife, Zipporah, will run into trouble with God because Moses had not circumcised their son as he was required (Exo. 4:24-26).

*Later Hebrew writers* - Israel would eventually immerse itself in idolatry, but God will again call on Israel to circumcise its heart (Jer. 4:4; 9:25-26).

*NT writers* - Jesus will tell the Jews that they have circumcision, not from the Law, but “from the fathers” (John 7:22), which must be an allusion to this “covenant of circumcision” here in Genesis 17. Stephen, in rehearsing the history of Israel in Acts 7, makes reference to the “covenant of circumcision” (7:8), a term nowhere else used. Since God’s people in Christ are a spiritual people, His people will no longer be circumcised physically (Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3), but circumcised in the heart at the moment of immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins (Col. 2:11-12; Acts 2:38).

#### TRANSLATION - 17:15-16:

**15** Then God said to Abraham, “Sarai, your wife, will not be called her name ‘Sarai,’ because ‘Sarah’ [will be] her name. **16** And I will bless her and also I will give from her to you a son and I will bless her and she will be for nations. Kings [and] peoples from her will be.”

#### COMMENTS:

This two-verse section of God’s speech turns its focus to Sarai. Once again, we see evidence that neither the Bible in general nor Moses specifically (the author of Genesis), were misogynistic. God speaks directly to Sarah and shares His covenant, His blessing, with her. If the patriarchs were as misogynistic as modern feminists allege, this paragraph would not even be found in the Bible. Since God has revealed a new name for Himself (17:1) and he has given Abram a new name (17:5), God also changes Sarai’s name, to denote that she, too, participates in His covenant (17:15). Both names mean “princess;” they are only alternate spellings. The “seed” will not come through Hagar; the seed will not be Ishmael. Probably, for thirteen years, Abraham has thought that Ishmael will be the promised seed. However, here, God affirms that Sarah will be a participant in this covenant as well. As with Abraham, nations of peoples and kings will come through Sarah.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - God is speaking to Abraham here, but God will repeat the promise to Abraham in 18:10 where Sarah will overhear. Apparently between this text and 18:10 Abraham did not share God’s message with Sarah, or at least not enough for Sarah to absorb the information, for in that context, she laughed to herself out of unbelief (18:12).

*Later Hebrew writers* - The only text of the OT outside of Genesis which mentions Sarah is Isaiah 51:2. In that passage, Isaiah’s message is that just as surely as God took Abraham (“one”) and, with Sarah’s help, made a multitude, so God can bring Israel back from exile and make them a fruitful nation again.

*NT writers* - Paul writes of Sarah and the “deadness” of her womb in Romans 4:19, but God gave them Isaac despite man’s “wisdom” saying all hope was lost. In Romans 9:9, Paul will quote God’s promise to Sarah from 18:10. The Hebrew writer will praise Sarah’s faith in Hebrews 11:11 and Peter will praise her submission to Abraham, her husband, in 1 Peter 3:6.

#### TRANSLATION - 17:17-21:

**17** Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said in his heart, “To a son of a hundred years will he be born? And even Sarah, the daughter of ninety years will give birth?”

**18** And Abraham said to God, “Perhaps Ishmael will be before your face.”

**19** So God said, “Indeed, Sarah, your wife, is giving birth for you a son and you will call his name ‘Isaac’ and I will establish my covenant with him for an indefinite covenant, to his seed after him. **20** And to Ishmael, I heard you, behold, I am blessing him and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him very, very much. Twelve princes will be born and I will give him a great nation. **21** And my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season in the next year.”

### WORDS:

“Laughed” (verse 17; 13 times) is a related word with the name “Isaac.” Of the thirteen times the verb is used, eleven are in Genesis; the other two are: Exo. 32:6; Judg. 16:25. The word can be translated in a broader sense than just “laugh.” It can be translated also “to joke with, amuse, or fondle.”

### COMMENTS:

Abraham fell on his face a second time in the presence of God Almighty and then laughed in pure unbelief. He was 99 years old! He thought, in his heart, that he could not have another child! We could easily assume that Abraham had continued to have a sexual relationship with Sarah, perhaps even Hagar, but no other child, much less a son had yet been born. Having a son at 86 years old apparently did not phase him but thirteen further years had dampened his belief. Even Sarah was past the age of child-bearing, Abraham thought. Abraham suggests that Ishmael might be the promised seed in the eyes of God. Surely God doesn't think that Abraham and Sarah could have a child themselves!

So, God speaks again, emphasizing (“Indeed”) that it will, in fact, be Sarah who will have the son by Abraham. It will be a son and God provides the name, a play on the verb “to laugh:” Isaac. The indefinite covenant that God had mentioned to Abraham and Sarah will be given to Isaac and to his “seed,” his children. Sarah would give birth that same time, the following year.

As for Ishmael, God promises Abraham that He has heard him, the other son is also blessed by God (cf. the promise from Gen. 12:2). Ishmael will also be made fruitful and multiplied very, very much. The promise of verse 20 repeats and recalls the command God gave to Adam in 1:28. Twelve princes will come from Ishmael and also great nations (25:12-18).

### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - God had promised Hagar in chapter 16 to bless Ishmael. Here, God promises Abraham that He will bless Ishmael. That promise, the blessing, and the care God extended to Hagar and Ishmael should have motivated them and subsequent generations to remain believers in Jehovah God. Isaac would carry throughout his life a reminder of Abraham's unbelief at God's promise. “Isaac” comes from the verb “to laugh.” Every reference to Isaac's birth references this fact: 17:19; 18:12; 21:6.

*Later Hebrew writers* - The Ishmaelites were known as traders (Gen. 37:25, 27-28; 39:1; Judges 8:24). For other references to these people, see 1 Chronicles 2:17; 27:30; Psa. 83:6. There are other men named Ishmael in the OT.

*NT writers* - Ishmael is not mentioned in the NT at all. Jesus will say in John 8:56 that Abraham “rejoiced” to anticipate the day of the Messiah. We do not know to what text Jesus may be referring. Perhaps, He had in the mind the laughing of Abraham at the thought that God could fulfill His promise of a seed through two people who were past childbearing years. Or, perhaps Jesus had in mind Genesis 21:6.

### TRANSLATION - 17:22-27:

**22** And He finished speaking with him and God went up, [away] from Abraham.

**23** So Abraham took Ishmael, his son, and all born in his house and all bought with his silver, every male, the men of the house of Abraham and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in that same day just as God spoke to him. **24** Now Abraham [was] son of ninety and nine years when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. **25** And Ishmael, his son, [was] son of thirteen years when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. **26** In that same day were circumcised Abraham and Ishmael, his son. **27** And all the men of his house, born in his house, bought with silver, along with the son of a foreigner they were circumcised with him.

### COMMENTS:

Finally, God finished His talk with Abraham and He “went up” from Abraham. The prior paragraph of the chapter emphasizes Abraham’s obedience: “in that same day” is mentioned twice. He took Ishmael as his son and circumcised him. The whole paragraph emphasizes the obedience of Abraham in circumcising all the men in his house. Ishmael, at that time, was thirteen, while Abraham was ninety-nine.

#### APPLICATION:

*Moses’ contemporaries* - After the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua will circumcise a new generation of Israelite to conform to the regulations of the OT law (Joshua 5:1-8).

*Later Hebrew writers* - Israel would eventually take the covenant of circumcision very seriously as appears in the NT. While God had commanded physical circumcision and also spiritual circumcision of the heart, Israel seemed to have still focused on the physical circumcision.

*NT writers* - To “circumcise” and “circumcision” are found 55 times in the NT. Most references are to the Jewish practice, including John (Luke 1:59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21). Physical circumcision is not a part of Christianity; although Paul will say Christians are of the “true circumcision” (Phil. 3:3) if they worship in spirit and in truth. In Christ, there is “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” (Col. 3:11). Immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38) is the moment when believers are circumcised in the heart (Col. 2:11-12). Romans 4:9-12 is an extended discussion of the faith of Abraham which obeyed, in the days before circumcision was made a law. Abraham was considered righteous by God (Gen. 15:6) *before* he was circumcised (17:24).