



The Covenant of Circumcision Genesis 17:1-18:15

Introduction

In the last lesson, Abram found himself in the gulf between God's divine promises and what was taking place around him. Circumstances did not seem to be leading to fulfillment of the promised heir. In fear, Abram and Sarai took matters into their own hands. They arranged for Sarai's maid servant, Hagar, to cohabit with Abram. She conceived and gave birth to Ishmael, who became father of the Arab nations. Although God was gracious to Hagar, the Jews and Arabs are still contending with the consequences of that event today.

OUTLINE of GENESIS 17:1-18:15

I. Affirmation of the Covenant - Genesis 17:1-9

II. Sign of the Covenant - Genesis 17:10-14

III. Sarai, Isaac and Ishmael - Genesis 17:15-21

IV. Abraham's Obedience - Genesis 17:22-27

V. The Lord Visits Abraham - Genesis 18:1-15

I. Affirmation of the Covenant - Genesis 17:1-9

A. The Almighty God - Genesis 17:1-4.

God did not speak to Abram for thirteen years after Ishmael's birth, and when He did, He presented Himself as "El Shaddai" which means "Almighty God". This is the name of God which emphasizes His power and might. By using this name, God was indicating that He was about to display His power to make nature bow and minister to grace. He was assuring Abram that the time had come for the covenant promises to begin to take place. He admonished Abram to "*walk before Me and be blameless*". The call was for Abram to live a God-conscious life with a wholehearted commitment to please Him. The word "*blameless*" does not mean "sinless". It means "complete" or "whole". God wanted all of Abram, heart, soul, spirit and mind, and He wanted him all the way. That is how God wants you too, not one person on Sunday mornings and another the rest of the week.

Recognizing his own unworthiness, Abram fell face downward before Almighty God in humble adoration. This is a meaningful response, an example we all might do well to follow, if physically able, when the reality of God grips our souls.

B. Abram's New Name - Genesis 17:5

God stressed the importance of His covenant promise

with Abram by renaming him Abraham. This new name reflected a change from "exalted father" to "the father of a multitude of nations". His old name referred to his aristocratic ancestry. The new name endowed Abraham with a new identity and a new relationship with God, a "new destiny and a new mission" (The Geneva Study Bible).

C. Confirmation of the Promises 17:6-9

God confirmed the covenant promises to Abraham with some new features:

- Among Abraham's countless descendants would come competent leaders worthy of the name "King".
- The covenant would be an "everlasting covenant", including an "everlasting possession" of the land of Canaan.
- The promised land of Canaan was deeded to Abraham and his descendants by divine right: "*I give to you*".
- God promised to be their God.

Keep in mind that the ultimate blessing to come from the Abrahamic Covenant would be the Seed, as pointed out in Galatians 3:16, "*Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. God does not say 'and to seeds', as of many, but as of one, 'and to your Seed,' who is Christ.*"

II. Sign of the Covenant - Genesis 17:10-14

A. Abraham's Obligation - Genesis 17:10-14.

The outward sign to be imposed on Abraham for the consummation of the covenant was circumcision. Abraham, every male in his household, and every male child of his descendants was to have the foreskin cut away. The rite was to be performed when the child was eight days old.

Circumcision set apart the nation of Israel as belonging to God and also set apart every male as belonging to the physical and ethnic line of Abraham and being heirs of the covenant promises. There was also a health benefit connected with the procedure since the folds of the foreskin could harbor disease.

B. The Meaning of the Sign

Circumcision of the foreskin represented a sort of purification – a getting rid of evil in the body, it

symbolized the cutting away of sin and being cleansed. John MacArthur notes that "It was the male organ which most clearly demonstrated the depth of depravity because it carried the seed that produced depraved sinners. Thus, circumcision symbolized the need for a profoundly deep cleansing to reverse the effects of depravity" (The MacArthur Bible Commentary).

In its essence, circumcision was a personal and a spiritual sign. It was a reminder to each man that he belonged to God and that his strength and ability for fruitfulness came only through the blessing of Almighty God. This makes it clear that circumcision of the flesh is not adequate to please God. God desires the heart, the ear, indeed, the whole person, to be His. This "whole person" symbolism of the rite of circumcision was indicated later in Scripture for those who accepted Abraham's covenant relationship with God. This is seen in the following passages: "*Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer*" (Deuteronomy 10:16). "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

III. Sarai, Isaac and Ishmael - Genesis 17:15- 21

A. Sarai's New Name - Genesis 17:15-19

God directed Abraham to change his wife's name from Sarai ("my princess") to Sarah ("a princess"). The change removes the limiting pronoun "my" and gives confirmation to God's promise that she would be the mother of nations and kings.

In conjunction with the name change, God promised to bless Sarah with a son. Incredulous, Abraham fell on his face and laughed. His spontaneous reaction was a mixture of wonder, joy and skepticism. After voicing his disbelief that a child could be born to Sarah at the age of ninety, Abraham asked about Ishmael. God told him that his heir would not be Ishmael, but would be born to Sarah. His name was to be Isaac, and the everlasting covenant would be established with him and his descendants.

B. Abraham's Concern for Ishmael - Genesis 17:20-21

Abraham's plea for Ishmael was not a substitute suggestion for Sarah's promised son. Rather, Abraham wanted Ishmael to live in God's favor. God graciously promised blessing to Ishmael. He would be fruitful, with many descendants. He would be over a great nation and have twelve princes as sons. It has been suggested that the Arabs are the descendants of Ishmael. If this is correct, the Islamic nations have fulfilled God's promise of becoming numerous and widespread. The

covenant, however, remained with the promised line of God's chosen people, and would be fulfilled through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. God said, "*My covenant I will establish with Isaac.*"

IV. Abraham's Obedience - Genesis 17:22-27

God's definitive statements further strengthened Abraham's faith and obedience and prompted him to carry out God's command concerning circumcision. All males in Abraham's family and all other males of his household were circumcised, including Ishmael. This does not mean that all were included in the covenant but that they could, by choice, share in the blessings promised Abraham. As H.G. Leupold (The Biblical Expositor) puts it, "Circumcision constituted an invitation for Ishmael and others to regard themselves as candidates to share in the blessings of the covenant. They may afterward reject such spiritual opportunities, even though they continued the practice of circumcision."

Application

Throughout his life Abraham experienced periods of doubt which were followed by even stronger faith and implicit obedience. Do you identify with Abraham's growing in the mercy and grace of God by having intimate fellowship with God through His Word? Note the following admonitions to you: "*As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving*" (Colossians 2:6-7); and "*Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

V. The Lord Visits Abraham - Genesis 18:1-15

A. Setting - Genesis 18:1-8

Some months later, Abraham was resting in front of his tent on a typically hot day. He saw three men approaching and ran to meet them. At first, he did not perceive that one of the three was the Lord Himself, and that the other two were angels, but he bowed and greeted them cordially with the customary courtesy shown to visitors. Upon recognizing that the Chief Figure of the three was God in human form, Abraham prostrated himself as an act of adoration and worship. He knew then that this visit was the Lord's gracious initiative and eagerly invited the three to come into his tent for foot-washing, rest and refreshment. Theologians refer to this manifestation of God in human form as a theophany.

“Theophany” is a theological term meaning a temporary, physical appearance of God in human form. A wider definition would say it is any symbolic representation of God, such as a “a smoking oven and a burning torch” (Genesis 15:17) or a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). Theophany is to be distinguished from the term “incarnation”, which is the appearance of the Son of God taking on flesh when He came as a babe in Bethlehem. In the Old Testament, the pre-incarnate Christ sometimes is referred to as the Angel of the Lord as in Genesis 16:7-13.

B. The Promise of the Seed - Genesis 18:9-10

The visitors asked about Sarah, knowing full well that she was in the tent but in another section and out of view. Women in that day were commonly near but not visible when their husbands entertained guests. Even today, Bedouin women sit close to the tent’s partition and listen to the men’s discussion in the other section.

The Lord emphatically stated that when He returned in one year’s time, Sarah would have given birth to the promised heir. Sarah listened to these incredible words.

C. Sarah’s Response - Genesis 18:11-12

Sarah’s response mirrored that of Abraham’s earlier one. She laughed inwardly, incredulous at this seemingly impossible statement. She knew she was well beyond the age of experiencing sexual delight and conceiving a child. She did not scoff, but there was a sense of unbelief in her reaction.

Though He could not see her, the Lord revealed His omniscience by discerning Sarah’s response and asked “*Why did Sarah laugh?*” followed by the rhetorical statement “*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*” When Sarah realized that the guest was offended, she denied that she had laughed. His surprising grasp of her attitude momentarily confused her and she tried to lie her way out of it. The Lord considered her denial as unworthy of further consideration and gently rebuked her with, “*No, but you did laugh!*”

Application

What do you do with the promises God has made to you in His Word? Do you doubt them as Sarah did in this scene? Or do you claim them and “trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5) Memorizing Scripture and repeating passages to yourself, especially during difficult times, will give you a sense of peace that surpasses human understanding. Read Isaiah 41:10 and 43:1b-3a and personalize with your own name.