

Genesis 17:1-27

The last verse of Chapter 16 tells us that Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born to him.

In the very next verse, that is Genesis 17:1, we find that Abram had reached the ripe old age of 99.

So as far as scripture is concerned, 13 years have passed in silence.

Apparently during that time nothing worthy of note had happened in Abram's life. Abram and Sarai had run ahead of God in an attempt to speed up His plan.

However, instead of furthering His promise, they had brought discord into their home, and put God's blessings on hold for 13 long years.

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When God finally broke the silence, He immediately gathered up the various threads of His promises and re-established them in Abram's life.

Genesis 17:1 **"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect."**

No doubt life had gone on in the usual way since the birth of Ishmael.

And perhaps, in the humdrum of daily living, Abram had more or less lost the vision.

So when **"the LORD appeared to Abram,"** His opening remarks included the command **"walk before me."**

Unless Abram would walk by faith, no progress could be made.

Thirteen uneventful years would simply stretch into fourteen uneventful years. Yes, Abram needed to **"walk before"** God, for he had too many promises just waiting to be fulfilled to be content with life as usual.

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And this admonition to Abram should also strike a chord in our own lives. Do our hopes and expectations for the future rest upon man and things, or upon God? Oh yes, material things are important. We need our jobs, or we need our pension cheques. We do have physical needs. But the question remains, are we relying upon God, or the economy?

And we also need to ask the question, *Who is the object of our lives?*

What motivates us as we begin each new day?

Do we live to serve God, or are we simply chasing rainbows?

God commands us, as He commended Abram, to--
"walk before me."

Yes, we need to say with the Psalmist--**"My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him.**

6 He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defence; I shall not be moved" Psalm 62:5-6.

Now we already know that nothing can be added to Christ's salvation.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast."

So in like manner, we need to lean upon Christ and upon Christ alone for our daily needs.

This is a very important principle, for God will not share His glory with another. Although He might use many natural means to meet our needs, in the final analysis, we must rely completely upon Him.

And, actually, I cannot think of a better foundation.

When unerring wisdom, omnipotent power, and infinite love combine, the trusting heart has every reason to enjoy unruffled repose.

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Well, let's get back to Abram.

Genesis 17:1-4 "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

² And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

³ And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,

⁴ As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations."

The time was nearly at hand for the promised son to be born, so Abram was once again called upon to exercise complete faith in God.

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As we noticed in last week's lesson, three distinct names for God are used in these verses.

In V 1, we find the name "**LORD**," which, when it appears all in caps, is His name *Jehovah*.

Again in V 1 we see the name "**the Almighty God**," or El Shaddai.

It is the name that primarily sets God forth as the strengthener and satisfier of His people.

And finally in V 3, we see the name "**God**" or Elohim.

This is the first name for deity found in scripture, and appears in Genesis 1:1 "**In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.**"

So no doubt this threefold reference to God's name indicates that the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all present to reinstate God's promises in this one great statement, known as the Abrahamic Covenant.

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Even though all of God's promises were still the same, for indeed His promises never change, we now notice that there were some new aspects to this covenant.

First of all, Abram received a *new name* in confirmation of God's promise.

V 4-6 **"As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.**

⁵ Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

⁶ And I will make thee exceeding

fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee."

God's promise still remained in the future, so He said, **"and thou shalt be a father of many nations."**

However, the determination of this promise had already been settled in heaven.

And that is why God said, **"a father of many nations have I made thee."**

This is always the way with God's promises. When God says He will do something, it is as good as done!

And in a way, Abram's very existence was a testimony to God's faithfulness.

Yes, even though he had been childless most of his life, he bore the name Abram, which means *high father*.

And you know that might have been a bit of an embarrassment for him, especially as time went on, and he remained childless.

And now, at the grand old age of 99, God gave him a new name.

He called him Abraham, which means, "father of many nations."

Under the circumstances, his first name would seem a little odd, but to be called "**a father of many nations**" when he had but one son, and he was not even the son promise, would be the ultimate test of his faith.

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V 7-8 **"And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto**

thee, and to thy seed after thee.

⁸ And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

The stability of this covenant rested solely upon God's shoulders--"**And I will establish my covenant.**"

As a consequence, it was a covenant that could not fail, and absolutely would not end, for God also clearly said it was "**an everlasting covenant.**"

Under its terms, Israel inherited "**all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.**"

According to this covenant, Israel was to become a nation. They were to be God's

chosen people, and they were the heirs
of the Promised Land.

Yes, this covenant is exclusively Jewish,
and it has no direct application to the
Church of Jesus Christ.

And even though Israel has grievously erred
in the past, their failure does not
alter the covenant promises--postpone
them, yes, but not alter--for it is "**an
everlasting covenant.**"

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V 9-14 **"And God said unto Abraham, Thou
shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou,
and thy seed after thee in their
generations.**

¹⁰ **This is my covenant, which ye shall
keep, between me and you and thy seed
after thee; Every man child among you
shall be circumcised.**

11 And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.

13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

14 And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off

from his people; he hath broken my covenant."

We have just emphasized the point that the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional, and cannot be altered.

God said, **"I will establish my covenant,"** and He has.

But now we see the words in V9-10, **"Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.**

¹⁰ **This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised."**

Does this throw the responsibility for the success of the Abrahamic Covenant back onto human resources?

If that were true, then God's words, "**I will establish my covenant,**" would be meaningless.

But we need not be concerned, for V 11 clearly tells us that circumcision was not the basis upon which the Abrahamic Covenant rested, but was only "**a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.**"

It was only a sign, a seal, which indicated that the circumcised individual was included in the covenant.

Yes, the Abrahamic Covenant rests exclusively upon God's faithfulness, and absolutely guarantees Israel's benefits.

However, the individual who neglects or rejects the seal will be excluded from that nation and from the benefits ascribed to it.

V 14 "And the uncircumcised man child whose
flesh of his foreskin is not
circumcised, that soul shall be cut off
from his people; he hath broken my
covenant."

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So Abraham immediately recognized that
circumcision was essential, and obeyed
God's command without question.

V 23-27 "And Abraham took Ishmael his son,
and all that were born in his house,
and all that were bought with his
money, every male among the men of
Abraham's house; and circumcised the
flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame
day, as God had said unto him.

²⁴ And Abraham was ninety years old
and nine, 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 In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

27 And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him."

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At the risk of interrupting our lesson on Abraham and the book of Genesis, I would like to spend some time on the study of this whole subject of circumcision.

As we have just realized, the right of circumcision is very important to the nation of Israel.

So, in view of its importance to Israel, it is hard to fathom how often it was neglected both by individuals and even the whole nation.

Now, we might have forgiven Moses for neglecting the circumcision of his children.

After all, he had been brought up in the culture of Egypt, and he had married a Gentile wife.

But God did *not* forgive him, and finally stopped him dead in his tracks on his way back to liberate Israel.

Also, when the children of Israel were leaving Egypt, God had to insist that the entire nation, including their servants, be circumcised before they could observe the Passover.

Again, during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel carelessly neglected the circumcision of their children.

Finally, God had to insist that Joshua correct their neglect as soon as the people entered the Promised Land.

Joshua 5:4-5 **"And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt.**

⁵ **Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised."**

Yes, even though they were so careless at times, God always insisted that circumcision was a required ordinance.

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So under these circumstances, it was not surprising to find Judaizing legalists in the early church zealously teaching that circumcision was a requirement for salvation.

This, of course, was a false doctrine, and one that added to the finished work of Christ.

As a result, in Galatians 5:1-6, we find Paul writing to the Christians and exhorting them to---"**Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.**

2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that
if ye be circumcised, Christ shall
profit you nothing.

3 For I testify again to every man
that is circumcised, that he is a
debtor to do the whole law.

4 Christ is become of no effect unto
you, whosoever of you are justified by
the law; ye are fallen from grace.

5 For we through the Spirit wait for
the hope of righteousness by faith.

6 For in Jesus Christ neither
circumcision availeth any thing, nor
uncircumcision; but faith which worketh
by love."

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Yes, circumcision has no value whatsoever in
the Church of Jesus Christ.

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However, in spite of that fact, circumcision does have a symbolic value for the Christian.

For us, it pictures the putting away of the sins of the flesh.

Paul pointed this out in Colossians 2:6-13--

"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him:

7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:

11 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

So the bottom-line is this. The Christian must add nothing to Christ's finished

work of salvation--"**ye are complete in him.**"

However, as far as our daily walk is concerned, we should put "**off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ**" and count ourselves to be risen with Him "**in newness of life.**"

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Returning now to Genesis 17, we find Abram lying prostrate on the ground, listening to God's promises.

V 15-18 "**And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.**

¹⁶ **And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of**

nations; kings of people shall be of her.

17 Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

18 And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!"

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V 15 " And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be."

In all of God's promises to Abraham, this was the first time that He specifically said that Sarah would be **"a mother of nations."**

Previously there was no need to mention this, for God always intended that Sarah would be Abraham's only wife.

But now He specifically includes in His promise to Abraham the fact that Sarah would be the mother of this promise.

There were to be no more Hagers.

No, there would be no more loopholes for a lack of faith.

So Sarai would now be Sarah, which means princess, for God said **"kings of people shall be of her."**

Her old name Sarai meant *my princess*, and certainly that beautiful lady had always been Abraham's princess.

But now, having personally received God's promise, she became a princess in her own right.

Yes, after 13 years of silence, God gave them a new beginning, and with that new beginning, a new name.

Abraham was to be **"a father of many nations,"** and Sarah was to be the princess, for God said, I **"will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her."**

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V 17 **"Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?"**

At this point, it is very easy to get the wrong idea.

In fact, I was originally of the opinion that Abraham had laughed at God's

promises in unbelief, but now I find this was not the case.

Certainly, in a later chapter, we do find Sarah laughing at the seeming impossibility of God's promise, and even though she did it quietly, she was rebuked for her actions.

But here the situation was quite different. As we know, there are many kinds of laughter.

There is the full-bodied laughter which comes when something really strikes us funny.

Then there is that hideous cackle of evil laughter, which delights in the misfortune or misdeeds of others.

But Abraham's laughter was completely different from either of these.

You might call his laughter the laughter of
faith.

Yes, Abraham laughed out of sheer joy!

He laughed at the glorious impossibility of
a child being born to one that was 100
years old, and to one whose wife was 90
years old!

How his neighbours would gasp in unbelief!

What a wonderful event it would be!

It just filled him with joy to contemplate
such a thing.

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But how do we really know that Abraham's
laughter was the laughter of faith, and
not like the unbelieving laughter of
his wife?

Well, we need only look at God's reaction to
Abraham's outburst, for certainly He
would know his heart.

Abraham laughed, but God did not rebuke him. Also, Romans 4 tells us what Abraham's inner thoughts were when he laughed.

Romans 4:19-20 **"And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb:**

20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;

21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."

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Think of the situation.

For 13 long years, there had been no revelation from God.

For 13 years, he had lived with the fruits
of his own impatience.

Would God forgive and forget?

Would God ever personally speak to him
again?

No doubt these were the thoughts plaguing
his mind.

So, when God appeared to him and renewed His
promise of a son, the dear old man
could not contain himself any longer.
He just laughed for joy!

In fact, Abraham so rejoiced in spirit that
God called his son "**Isaac**," which means
laughter.

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V 18 **"And Abraham said unto God, O that
Ishmael might live before thee!"**

Here again we might get the wrong idea.

Was Abraham still hanging on to his old plan of obtaining God's promises through natural means?

I don't think so.

After 13 years of living with the sad results of his own schemes, I don't think he was about to interfere with God's plans again.

No, Abraham had something entirely different in mind.

Naturally, as a parent, he was concerned when God's plans seemed to be completely bypassing his son Ishmael.

So his father's heart makes the plea, "O

that Ishmael might live before thee!"

And this was the proper attitude, for it is always the duty of parents to pray for their children.

Yes, it should be the desire of all godly parents that their children would walk before God in righteousness.

And in so far as it was possible, for after all, Ishmael was not the son of promise, God answered Abraham's prayer.

V 19-22 **"And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.**

²⁰ **And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.**

²¹ **But my covenant will I establish**

with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.

22 And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham."

Yes, God would be good to Ishmael for Abraham's sake, but there was a limit to what He would do for him.

God's covenant blessings could only come through Sarah's son. It was an unalterable decree--"**my covenant will I establish with Isaac.**"

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For the most part, God had put His servant back on track.

Abraham and Sarah were given new names, and so far as was possible, they were given a new beginning.

I have to say so *far as was possible*, for even with all their new beginnings, the

fruits of their unbelief would remain to trouble them and their descendants after them.

Yes, in spite of God's wonderful plan for their lives, from this point on, joy must be mixed with sorrow.