

GENESIS

Lesson 30

The Covenant of Circumcision - Genesis 17

God Confirms His Covenant with Abram with a Sign and a Name Change

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

⁹ Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 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. 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. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

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?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 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. ²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." ²² When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

²³ 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. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, ²⁵ and his son Ishmael was thirteen; ²⁶ Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. ²⁷ And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

Genesis 17:1-27 [NIV]

Abram Gets a Name Change

As we are introduced to our study of this lesson in Genesis 17:1-2, we observe God commanding Abram to "walk before me faithfully and be blameless." God goes on to say that once Abram does this, "then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." We might ask how Abram is to do more of what God commands, as he has already demonstrated his faith in God, and it was "credited to him as righteousness." (See Genesis 15:6.)

God also tells Abram in the beginning of Genesis 17 that He is changing his name to Abraham, because "I have made you a father of many nations." We should note that there is a lot packed in to that statement. God--no one else--has already made Abraham a "father of many nations." It is a completed action already on God's part. There is no doubt that God is doing this, and that He has done it.

Critics point to the story of Abraham and declare that it is an allegory, or a fable, a fiction created to tell a story. They assert that Abraham is not a real, factual person. My dissertation research established that Abraham is real. Regardless of man's opinion, God knows it--and He knows what He had already done through Abraham.

Today, we look back on this promise--this covenant with Abraham--and see that indeed he is the father of many nations and patriarch of the three largest world religions.

However, at the time of Abraham, all that Abraham knew was that he was putting his faith in God and he was trusting that God would deliver on His promise. Just as Abraham looked forward to future blessings based on God's covenant with him, we look forward to the coming return of Jesus our Savior.

We will be exploring the practice of name-changing that was common in Abram's time--even up through modern-day. They can denote a change of status or location, a situational change, or a permanent change in life, as when a wife changes her maiden name to that of her husband's. Other examples in the Bible of name changes are Jacob's name being changed to "Israel" and Hosea's name being changed to "Joshua." There are other examples throughout the Bible, so we can see it was common practice when a change in one's life was significant.

The Sign of the Covenant

God then tells Abram what he must do in order to establish his covenant with God so that God will greatly increase his numbers.

1. What does God instruct Abram, and his descendants to do? (See Genesis 17:10-14.)

God goes on to explain to Abram that any male not circumcised will be "cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." God tells Abram that His covenant is made "in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant."

2. Did Abraham and Ishmael both get circumcised? (See Genesis 17:23-27.)

3. Does this mean that Ishmael gets the promises of God? (See Genesis 17: 20-22.)

We should also be aware that this is not the only time God calls for his chosen people to be circumcised.

4. Read Joshua 5:2-9 and note what it tells us about this circumcision.

Sarai Gets a Name Change

In Genesis 17:15-16, we see that God now changes Sarai's name to Sarah, and He tells Abraham that she will bear Abraham a son, and that "she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham, however, is concerned about his thirteen-year-old son Ishmael and asks God "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" (Genesis 17:18) God promises Abraham that he will "surely bless him," and that Ishmael will be "the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation." (Genesis 17:20) However, God tells Abraham in Genesis 17:21 that He will also make His covenant with Isaac. Later in our study, we will examine the story of Isaac and the promise that God made to Abraham about him. God's promises are sure and we will see evidence of this when we study Genesis Chapter 21 and the birth of Isaac.

Based on our findings in this lesson, you might ask if believers in Christ need to also be circumcised in order to be saved. This was a question debated by early Christians and the Apostles, and it is recorded in Acts Chapter 15. The conclusion is summed up in Acts 15:28-29, which reads in part, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things." The requirement of circumcision is not a requirement to be saved. Acts 2:21 tells us clearly that, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

As we close this lesson, we should remember that we, too, are also set apart as believers in Christ and heirs to God's promises. In Acts 3:25, we are told that we "...are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'"

May you be a blessing to someone in your personal encounters this week, as we celebrate the promises of God and the eternal salvation granted to us by Jesus!

In Christ,

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