

Genesis Chapter 17 - Commentary By Mike Wells

Chapter 17 Overview:

In this chapter; (1) God renews His covenant with Abram in verses 1-6. (2) The practice of circumcision was instituted in verses 7-14. (3) Sarai's name is also changed, and Isaac is promised in verses 15-22. Finally, (4) Abraham and his household are circumcised in verses 23-27.

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.*

- Thirteen years passed since the birth of Ishmael.
- No other information is given of what took place during those years.
- It may be Abram assumed Ishmael would be God's fulfillment of His promise.
- The name *Almighty God* in Hebrew is *El Shaddai*. It literally means 'God Almighty.'
- This is the first of forty-eight times God is so described in the Old Testament.
- He gave a simple command for Abram which by extension applies to any believer to this day. "*Walk before me, and be thou perfect.*"
- The word translated as **perfect** (*Mynt tamiyim*) means 'without blemish,' 'upright,' 'complete and whole.'
- The thought is that God commanded Abram to walk before him in righteousness, purity, and total dedication.
- God may have been admonishing him to return to complete faith.

Genesis 17 : 2 - *And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.*

- God's promise to *make my covenant between me and thee* is not conditioned upon His command in verse 1.
- God had already made His covenant with Abram.
- Here God is reiterating or confirming it once again to Abram.
- God reminded Abram to walk worthy of His promise to Him.
- The word translated as **make** (Ntn *nathan*) has a broad sense of thought which may be summed up in the word 'give.'
- The idea here likely is that God was about to establish or to begin to fulfill His covenant with Abram.
- The context makes clear that Abram was about to receive His son of promise. Once again God announced that He would multiply Abram exceedingly.
- This promise was to a ninety-nine year old man who had as yet to have any children by his wife.

Genesis 17 : 3-4 : *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*

- As God proceeded to re-affirm His covenant, Abram fell on his face.

- Indeed, Abram would be father to not only the coming nation of Israel, but also of the Arabic peoples, the Turks through Ishmael, and other peoples through the sons of Keturah.
- He spiritually also became the father to all thereafter who would believe.
- That is why we refer to him as Father Abraham – We are all spiritual sons of Abraham.

Genesis 17 : 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.

- God changed Abram’s name. *Abram* meant ‘**exalted father.**’
- However, his new name *Abraham* literally meant ‘**father of multitudes.**’
- Indeed, Abraham would become the father of many nations.

Genesis 17 : 6 - And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

- God for the fourth time reiterated His covenant to Abraham.
- Each time, a little more detail is added.
- Again, God promised him that he would make him “**exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.**”
- Abraham had to have faith to believe such a promise.
- As a ninety-nine year old man, he had yet to have one child by his wife.
- Now, God said he would become “*exceeding fruitful?*”
- Indeed, many kings were born of the seed of Abraham, from Saul to Zedekiah.
- The greatest king of course is Christ!!
- However, as will be soon noted, Abraham was perhaps confused as through whom God would fulfill His promise.

Genesis 17 : 7 - And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an ever- lasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

- Notice also that the covenant which God promised would be established between him and his seed forever.
- Jehovah promised to be God unto him and his seed forever.

Genesis 17 : 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.

- In addition, God once again promised the land wherein he was a **stranger** to Abraham and his seed.
- The word translated as **stranger** (rwgm *maguwr*) has the sense of being a ‘**pilgrim.**’
- In Hebrews 11:13, Abraham and Sarah “*confessed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*”
- We too are strangers here on earth.
- When we get saved we are no longer a citizen on earth, but we become a citizen in Heaven.
- God promised **the land** (Urah *ha- erez*) to Abraham and his seed.

- The land promised was Canaan, later known as Palestine.
- It was given to Abraham's seed.
- That clearly is not Ishmael or his descendants.
- The promised seed had yet to be born.
- Moreover, the promise of the land to Abraham's seed was "*for an everlasting possession.*"
- Again, God promised to be their God forever.
- God gave the land to the Jew.
- That promise has never been taken away and never will!

Genesis 17 : 9-12 – *9 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.*

- The token or symbol of the covenant made by God to Abraham was to be the circumcision of Abraham and every male (eight days and older) in his household.
- This practice was to be observed in his "*seed after thee in their generations.*"

Genesis 17 : 13-14 - *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.*

- Several comments are in order.
- First, the command of circumcision was made approximately fifteen years after Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Genesis 15 : 6 - *And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.*

- Romans 4 makes it clear, Abraham was justified (i.e., saved) when he believed God in Genesis 15:6 and his circumcision had nothing to do with it.
- Second, His circumcision was a "*token of the covenant betwixt me and you.*"
- The word translated as **token** (twa *owth*) has the sense of '*a sign.*'
- Circumcision was a *sign* or a 'seal' (Romans 4:11) of the righteousness he already had.
- It became a symbol of the covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendants after him.

Romans 4 : 11 - *And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:*

Genesis 17 : 15 - *And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.*

- God also announced that Sarai's name was to be changed.
- No longer would she be called **Sarai** which essentially meant 'princess,' but now she would be called **Sarah**.
- The distinction is that she now had been promoted. **Sarah** has a higher rank than **Sarai**.
- It is kind of like being called a duchess, queen, or lady in its highest sense versus to be called a mere princess.

Genesis 17 : 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.*

- God specifically noted that He would bless her, and give Abraham a son also of her.
- She like Abraham would become a mother of nations and kings would be through her.

Genesis 17 : 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?*

- Some have advanced the view that Abraham laughed in joy.
- However, the context seems to indicate his laughter was in disbelief.
- How could a man nearly one hundred years old and his wife at ninety have children?
- Though Abraham was a great man of faith, it would seem in his humanity, he had given up hope on God's original promise to him.

Genesis 17 : 18 - *And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!*

- Abraham proposed to God, ***O that Ishmael might live before thee!***
- Ishmael by now was thirteen years old.
- Though not the son of promise, he still was Abraham's son.
- He no doubt had come to be the apple of his dad's eye sort of speak.
- Therefore, Abraham pled with God to put his promised blessing on Ishmael.

Genesis 17 : 19 - *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.*

- Nevertheless, God made clear that Sarah would bear a son to Abraham and he was to call his name **Isaac**.
- That name literally means 'laughter.'
- Abraham was weak in faith to the point of laughter
- God informed him that that is exactly what he would name him.
- It would be a reminder to Abraham of his weakness of faith.

Genesis 17: 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.*

- God promised Abraham that he would still bless Ishmael
- He would multiply him and making him fruitful.
- The twelve princes of Ishmael are noted in Genesis 25:12-16.

Genesis 17 : 21 - *But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.*

- The covenant which God had long promised to Abraham would be with and through his coming son Isaac.
- In addition, Sarah would bear him to Abraham “*at this set time next year.*”
- The “*set time*” has the sense of the ‘*appointed time*’ in the next year.
- No longer was God’s promise on the distant horizon.
- It would come to pass in the next year.

Genesis 17 : 22 - *And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.*

- God departed.
- The word translated as “**went up**” (hle *alah*) has the sense of ‘**ascending**.’
- God must have ascended back to heaven in sight of Abraham.

Genesis 17 : 23-27 – *23 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.*

- Abraham had a renewed faith in God’s promise.
- He immediately obeyed his command to circumcise his household.
- He proceeded to circumcise every male in his household including himself and his son Ishmael.
- Abraham is specifically noted as being ninety-nine and Ishmael as thirteen years old at the time of circumcision. – OUCH!!