

Genesis 17 is the fourth record of God communicating His promises to Abraham. Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael was born. God appears to Abraham and reaffirms the covenant which He has made with Abraham.

I. *The person and promise of God (17:1-8, 15-16)*

1. *The Almighty God*

The name “God Almighty” translates El Shaddai. Of four different possibilities, “Almighty” is probably best supported both by the context of its use in the OT and its frequent translation by the LXX as such. Our Lord is the Almighty God, capable of doing whatever He wishes, for us and for Abraham.

God is certainly almighty because He promised to make the barren fruitful. Abraham would be fruitful (cf. vv 2, 4, 5, 6) and even Sarah, who at 90 had been barren her entire life, would have a son and become the mother of nations and kings.

The Lord as Almighty God, also guarantees the future. The Almighty makes everlasting promises (vv 7, 8, 19). God almighty can do the impossible and guarantee the eternal.

From Abraham God therefore required his dedication. “Walk before me and be blameless.” Abraham was to live in the recognition that God saw him and knew everything about him. He was to live believing that God could do everything which He determined to do. Thus he would please God.

2. *The reminder of God’s promise in their names*

God changed Abram, “exalted father”, to Abraham, “father of a multitude”, and He changed Sarai, “my princess”, to Sarah, “princess”. God made Abraham the father of many nations and promised Sarah that many kings would come from her. Their names would be constant reminders of God’s promise.

II. *The responsibility of Abraham and his descendants (17:9-14)*

God had made unconditional promises to Abraham in chapters 12, 13 and 15. He unilaterally “cut” the covenant in chapter 15. Now He is not adding conditions but giving a responsibility for Abraham and his descendants to outwardly show their acceptance of God’s covenant. Every male must be circumcised.

1. *The practice of circumcision*: Circumcision was already practiced in Egypt but not so in Mesopotamia. God required of Abraham that all males in the household had to be circumcised. All future generations, descendant or slave, were to be circumcised on the 8th day after their birth. Male slaves who were purchased were also to be circumcised.

2. *The significance of circumcision*

Circumcision was given to be a sign of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. It was to become a reminder of their dedication to God. Any male who refused circumcision was rejecting God and was to be cut off from the people.

We are not told explicitly the reason that God chose to use circumcision this way. Whatever the full symbolic significance, circumcision became a personal, intimate, continual reminder of the commitment which one should have to God.

The outward sign of physical circumcision should have a corresponding inward, spiritual reality. God used the figure of spiritual circumcision of the heart already by the time of the Exodus. See Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 16. “Circumcise your hearts.” Cf. Jer 4:4). Moses anticipates the New Covenant in Deut. 30:6. “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” (NIV) Outward physical circumcision is not a substitute for true commitment of the heart to God. Outward circumcision without obedience was in fact uncircumcision (cf. Romans 2:25-29).

All true believers today are circumcised of the heart. God enables the true believer to love Him with all our heart and with all our soul.

III. *The response of Abraham (17:17-27)*

The great promises to Abraham demanded great trust of God almighty. Although he started initially with hesitancy, Abraham finally responded in complete obedience.

1. *Initial hesitancy*: Abraham’s laughter may have been from joy or doubt. Whatever the reason, Abraham hesitated to embrace God’s promise fully. Never-the-less God graciously answered Abraham and encouraged him in his hesitancy. God promised blessing upon Ishmael but made it clear that Sarah would have a son, Isaac. God’s covenant would be established through Isaac and his descendants.

2. *Final obedience*: The only further report is of Abraham’s immediate obedience to the command to circumcise the males in his household. On that same day he, Ishmael, and all his household (probably over 318 men) were circumcised. Abraham was committed to obey God and believe that God would do what He had said.

It is most important to learn the lesson that Abraham learned, that God wants us to trust Him. It begins with understanding who God is and extends to knowing what God has said. Abraham had been learning this and now knew more. He had a name for the Creator-God, God Almighty.

But we also need to know what God has said. We cannot trust what He has said, unless we know it. This had been part of Abraham’s problem until receiving full clarity in chapter 17.

We, too, need to understand who God is and what God has said. We learn this in the Bible and we can trust God Almighty to do what he says.