“The Covenant Sign of Circumcision”

Genesis 17:1-14

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Introduction:

To wait on a promise is hard. To wait for a long time is harder. To wait for a huge promise of God to come to pass is even harder.

Two chapters before we reach the point of today’s lesson, God does just that, He gives Abram a huge promise. For the then childless man, God told him to expand his vision and trust; God told him to, “Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be,” (Genesis 15:5; discussed more thoroughly in October 1st lesson).

During the process of waiting for that promise to come to pass without any visible results to satisfy the expectation of what they were hoping for, Sarai, Abram’s wife, offered to him Hagar her servant, to bring forth a child (Genesis 16).

The child Hagar produces, Ishmael, we later find out that he is not the carrier of the promise God had given to Abram. Rather, it would be through a son that at that time, Sarah herself will produce (Genesis 17:15-19; her name will be changed at the time the promise is given).

To mark His covenant with Abraham (his name changes in the lesson at the time when the covenant specifics are given), God gives him the sign of circumcision. As the subject of today’s lesson, Abraham would find out that every male born in his
house, whether family or servant, would carry the symbol of this relational covenant with God on his own body, signifying to whom they belonged.

**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.”

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram.” The last verse of chapter 16 of the book of Genesis lets us know that when Abram became a father to Ishmael he was 86 years old (vs. 16). Now, stepping immediately over into this chapter, at its opening, we see that Abram is 99 years old. That is a 13-year span between the two and we are not given any specifics of what occurred during that time.

But, as Ishmael would have been learning and preparing to take on more adult responsibilities at his age (think of Bar Mitzvah), God appears to Abram and one of the first things He wants to assure him of is who it is that is speaking to him and what He can do.

Thus, He said unto him, “**I am Almighty God,**” or “El Shaddai” (compare Genesis 35:11), which speaks of God’s absolute strength and power to do absolutely anything. He, the only true living God, is reliant upon no one other than Himself to bring His promises to pass as He said He would.

With that, He instructs Abram to “**walk before me, and be thou perfect.**” The word “walk” really refers to the life one chooses to live “**before,**” or in the sight of, God. In a previous article, I wrote:

“You are identified by how you walk. You can tell if someone is tired by the way they walk. They may seem just a little slower and less focused due to exhaustion. If someone walks with a limp they can be identified as being sore or perhaps injured. A straight, persistent gait can imply confidence. Someone with pep in their step can give the impression of happiness. People pay attention to the way you walk.”
People are not the only ones who pay attention to our walk. God is watching each life that goes before Him. That’s what the word walk means in the Bible. It speaks of one’s life or conversation. Their daily day-to-day affairs. Colossians 1:10 exhorts us, “That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing.” (KJV). Your walk matters.” (Today, I Walk/Word For Life Says)

“And be thou perfect.” As God was preparing Abram to take on a mark that would identify him as His on the outside of his body, there was to be a mark of excellence and integrity dwelling in his inner man that would attest to the relationship he had with God. He was to walk blamelessly before God with a life characterized by those things that are pleasing to Him.

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

“And I will make my covenant between me and thee.” God’s “covenant” is the main, overarching theme of all these lessons. The current covenant discussed is the one discussed in our introduction regarding the promise to multiply Abram’s descendants (see Genesis 15:1-21). Here, God is reiterating His intention of fulfilling said covenant. Abram would soon come to learn that this covenant would not include the Ishmael factor found in the chapter and time in between then and now.

But, according to His original promise, God was going to “multiply thee exceedingly.” Approaching the ripe old age of 100, Abram probably couldn’t begin to understand how this was to be. However, that’s one of the most wonderful things about the promises of God. It isn’t our job to figure out how He will do it. Our job is just to believe that He “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,” (Ephesians 3:20).

Abram had been told through the original covenant found in chapter 15 that his seed would go and be strangers in a land that was not theirs for 400 years (15:13). Could he have imagined them coming out in the millions? Could he have
imagined that even from them, more people, kingdoms, lines of lineage, and nations would come? When God says that He will “multiply thee exceedingly,” that’s exactly what He intends to do. This is God’s promise to him. To Abram, He said this is the “covenant between me and thee.”

Genesis 17:3-5 “And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. 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.”

Abram’s response was correct. Our lesson tells us he “fell on his face.” This is a proper position for respect and worship before God. As we humble ourselves we exalt Him to the position of sovereign authority. No wonder when Jesus came on the scene in the New Testament John said, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” (John 3:30).

When Abram lay before God, God began to divulge more to him in regard to the covenant promise. One of the things He shared was that Abram would now be “a father of many nations.” The territory or borders of Abram’s original promise of being a father of a “great nation” (Genesis 12:2), which is singular, now has a plural aspect to it as he is promised more. More people, kindred’s, and familial ties to this great patriarch will emerge as Abram’s life and experiences and family expand.

Many are familiar with and well-rehearsed with the twelve tribes of Israel that came by way of Jacob who came through Isaac, the son of promise who would be the covenant carrier. But, what about those that came from Esau, Jacob’s brother (see Genesis 36:1-5)? One of the wives that Esau marries was a daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar (see Genesis 28:9 and 36:3). Esau became known as Edom (Genesis 36:1) and his sons that were bare unto him became the tribes of the Edomites.

And, since we made mention of Ishmael above, let us remember that God ensured him an inheritance of his own to be a great nation (Genesis 21:18). From
him, twelve sons who became “twelve princes according to their nations” (Genesis 25:16; see Genesis 25:12-16 for Ishmael’s family line, the Ishmaelites).

Then, after the death of Sarah, there is Abraham’s union with his second wife, Keturah. From her came six sons (Genesis 25:2), who themselves begot sons of their own and more family lines were established (Genesis 25:3-4).

And so it continued, many physical family lines and nations can be traced back to Abraham as well as spiritual family lines. We are told in Galatians 3:29, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

But, it all starts here with a covenant promise to Abram.

With the taking on the promise of becoming “a father of many nations,” his identity had to match up with what God was going to bring to pass in his life. Now, instead of being known as “Abram” which means “exalted father,” God said, “Thy name shall be Abraham” which comes with the meaning of being a “father of many.”

Currently, he is still only the father of one, Ishmael. And that one is not the one whom God chooses to be the promised covenant carrier. Isaac is not yet in the picture physically. But, God’s promise sees beyond the current circumstances we are in and He beholds and orchestrates the bigger picture at large.

This is why there is a need for a name change. Names mean everything, especially during the Bible era. Your name follows you through life, be it for good or bad. People know you by your name. History will record your life in conjunction with your name. Often names, especially in the Bible, demonstrate character and traits that are indicative of the individual. And, as an individual, “Abram” would not suffice anymore. The larger scope of God’s plans and promises needed him to become “Abraham,” whose name would match the destiny God had in store for him.

Genesis 17:6-8 “And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. 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. 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.”

When God originally promises Abraham that his descendants would be as innumerable as the stars in the heavens, He wasn’t joking. Although we can trace certain family ties back to Abraham, history cannot begin to record the lineage and heritage of every single person born as a result. Through the thousands of years that have passed since that original promise, families have multiplied, scattered to other regions, and multiplied again, and so on. Thus, fulfilling His promise to make him “exceeding fruitful.”

To grasp another visual picture of this, think of it in terms of actual fruit. Each piece of fruit has several seeds (I’m thinking in terms of an apple. Some fruit have more or less). Once planted, each seed grows to a tree (again, thinking of apples) that will produce 100’s, if not 1,000’s of apples. And the cycle continues.

Going back to the description we discussed previously from verse 4 as Abraham being a “father of many nations,” we can easily see how that fruitfulness which God promised was able to bring forth even more “nations” and “kings.”

But, we must keep in mind that the covenant that is being established here does not involve every line traced from Abraham. The “everlasting covenant,” which would come through Isaac and travel down through Jacob and his twelve sons, the children of Israel, is the same covenant which finds itself ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Romans 9:4-5; Hebrews 13:20).

“To be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee (vs. 7); I will be their God (vs. 8).” God sets the standards that He is not only willing to be in covenant with Abraham but with “thy seed after thee” as well. We see that fulfilled as generations came and went, some people stayed and some strayed, yet God held on to His covenant position to be their “God” (compare Leviticus 26:12, 45). With too many references in the Old Testament and the New to name, God’s desire has
always then, and always now, was and is to be “God,” the only “God” of His people’s heart.

“I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land.” The covenant that God made with Abraham included “land.” As the inheritance of land presently being discussed goes, God insures the possession of it for Abraham’s family line through Isaac, then Jacob, down to the twelve tribes of Israel. Although Abraham is the father of many nations, we reiterate that it is only these mentioned above and their families who are afforded the land. Exodus 32:13 tells us, “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever” (compare Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:7, 18-21).

Later in his life, Abraham will have given all he had to Isaac, while “the sons of concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son. . . (Genesis 25:5-6).

Psalm 105 reiterates again this blessing of an “everlasting covenant” (Psalm 105:10; read verses 6-12), or as today’s lesson calls it “an everlasting possession.” It was and is never to be annulled or voided or transferred to another people.

This is the same land Joshua was commanded to divide for the people during their conquest of the region (Joshua 1:6). Even when the people strayed from their relationship with God, and go into captivity, the promised “land” is still theirs to come back to. According to God (and, it’s only His word that matters), this “land” belongs to Abraham and “thy seed after thee.”

It’s part of the covenant package. In the future they will need this reminder: “I lifted up mine hand to give it unto your fathers: and this land shall fall unto you for inheritance,” (Ezekiel 47:14; see verse 13 also).

Genesis 17:9-14 “And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. 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. And ye shall circumcise the
flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. 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. 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. 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.”

“Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.” God has laid out all these benefits in being in such a relationship with Him. He has given the promise of multiplication, land, and more. And, He even said that He will be their God. Since all of this is true, they are expected to “keep my covenant,” He says. “Keep” means to adhere to or hold on to; to not let it slip.

This brings us to the main part of the covenant which this lesson focuses on: circumcision. We have already discussed a lot of the aspects of the covenant/promises that God intended to bring to pass for Abraham and his seed, but since a covenant, for the most part, is, in essence, a binding agreement or contract between two or more parties, God lays out His expectations for them to follow as a sign for them to bear in their bodies the outward mark, symbol, or “token of the covenant.”

The stipulations for this “token of the covenant” He puts before Abraham is that “Every man child among you shall be circumcised.” The word “circumcised” is referencing to the cutting off of the foreskin of a male child’s flesh of his reproductive organs, fulfilling the very meaning of the word which means to “cut.” This procedure will be a visible reminder that they are in a covenant relationship with God and He will do just as He has promised.

“He that is eight days old shall be circumcised . . . every male child . . . he that is born in the house, or bought with money.” The Bible gives us specific accounts of baby boys being circumcised when he is “eight days old”: Isaac (Genesis 21:4; Acts 7:8), John the Baptist (John 1:59), Jesus (Luke 2:21), Paul (Philippians 3:5).
Outside of the “eight days old” window time frame, immediately after Abraham received this order he circumcised all the males of his house (see Genesis 17:23-27). Before entering the Promised Land, Joshua circumcised those who were born in the wilderness because it had not been done (see Joshua 5:4-8). Paul circumcised Timothy because of the Jews in the region he was trying to minister to knew his father was a Greek (Acts 16:1-3). There are many more circumcision references regarding the people of God (do a quick concordance study).

To God, it didn’t matter if they born of Abraham’s seed or not. If they were with Abraham and his people, even if they were bought with money, they still had to receive the sign of this covenant. There were to be no exemptions. This was obligatory for all the males. They “must needs be circumcised” and bear this mark in their “flesh for an everlasting covenant.”

For those who refuse to obey and submit to this ordinance of God, they themselves will be “cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.” A broken covenant equals disobedience. And, God is never in a covenant relationship with the disobedient individual. They would be disqualified from the promises of God.

**Conclusion:**

Although circumcision of the flesh was the requirement for showing that one was in a relationship with God under the old covenant and law, we are told in Romans 2:29 that God is looking for circumcision of the heart; a life that is pleasing to God, not men through the keeping of the law (see other references found in Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Colossians 2:11; 1 Peter 3:4). This can only happen through a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ and His indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:9). The Holy Spirit can change us from the inside out rather than markers on our bodies that identify us from the outside in (2 Corinthians 3:18).