

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS CHAPTER 17

This chapter contains articles of agreement covenanted and concluded upon between the great Jehovah, the Father of mercies, on the one part, and pious Abram, the father of the faithful, on the other part. Abram is therefore called "the friend of God," not only because he was the man of his counsel, but because he was the man of his covenant; both these secrets were with him. Mention was made of this covenant [#Ge 15:18](#), but here it is particularly drawn up, and put into the form of a covenant, that Abram might have strong consolation. Here are,

I. The circumstances of the making of this covenant, the time and manner ([#Ge 17:1](#)), and the posture Abram was in, [#Ge 17:3](#).

II. The covenant itself. In the general scope of it, [#Ge 17:1](#). And, afterwards, in the particular instances.

1. That he should be the father of many nations ([#Ge 17:4,6](#)), and, in token of this, his name was changed, [#Ge 17:5](#).
2. That God would be a God to him and his seed, and would give them the land of Canaan, [#Ge 17:7,8](#). And the seal of this part of the covenant was circumcision, [#Ge 17:9-14](#).
3. That he should have a son by Sarai, and, in token thereof, her name was changed, [#Ge 17:15,16](#). This promise Abram received, [#Ge 17:17](#). And his request for Ishmael ([#Ge 17:18](#)) was answered, abundantly to his satisfaction, [#Ge 17:19-22](#).

III. The circumcision of Abram and his family, according to God's appointment, [#Ge 17:23-27](#).

Ver. 1.

Here is,

I. The time when God made Abram this gracious visit: *When he was ninety-nine years old*, full thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael.

1. So long, it should seem, God's extraordinary appearances to Abram were intermitted; and all the communion he had with God was only in the usual way of ordinances and providences. Note, There are some special comforts which are not the daily bread, no, not of the best saints, but they are favoured with them now and then. On this side heaven they have convenient food, but not a continual feast.

2. So long the promise of Isaac was deferred.

(1.) Perhaps to correct Abram's over-hasty marrying of Hagar. Note, The comforts we sinfully anticipate are justly delayed.

(2.) That Abram and Sarai being so far stricken in age God's power, in this matter, might be the more magnified, and their faith the more tried. See [#De 32:36](#); [Joh 11:6,15](#).

(3.) That a child so long waited for might be an *Isaac*, a son indeed, [#Isa 54:1](#).

II. The way in which God made this covenant with him: *The Lord appeared to Abram*, in

the *shechinah*, some visible display of God's immediate glorious presence with him. Note, God first makes himself known to us, and gives us a sight of him by faith, and then takes us into his covenant.

III. The posture Abram put himself into upon this occasion: *He fell on his face while God talked with him, #Ge 17:3.*

1. As one overcome by the brightness of the divine glory, and unable to bear the sight of it, though he had seen it several times before. Daniel and John did likewise, though they were also acquainted with the visions of the Almighty, **#Da 8:17; 10:9,15; Re 1:17.**
Or,

2. As one ashamed of himself, and blushing to think of the honours done to one so unworthy. He looks upon himself with humility, and upon God with reverence, and, in token of both, *falls on his face*, putting himself into a posture of adoration. Note,

(1.) God graciously condescends to talk with those whom he takes into covenant and communion with himself. He talks with them by his *word*, **#Pr 6:22.** He talks with them by his *Spirit*, **#Joh 14:26.** This honour have all his saints.

(2.) Those that are admitted into fellowship with God are, and must be, very humble and very reverent in their approaches to him. If we say we have fellowship with him, and the familiarity breeds contempt, we deceive ourselves.

(3.) Those that would receive comfort from God must set themselves to give glory to God and to worship at his footstool.

IV. The general scope and summary of the covenant laid down as the foundation on which all the rest was built; it is no other than the covenant of grace still made with all believers in Jesus Christ, **#Ge 17:1.** Observe here,

1. What we may expect to find God to us: *I am the Almighty God.* By this name he chose to make himself known to Abram rather than by his name *Jehovah*, **#Ex 6:3.** He used it to Jacob, **#Ge 35.11.** They called him by this name, **#Ge 28:3; 43:14; 48:3.** It is the name of God that is mostly used throughout the book of Job, at least in the *discourses* of that book. After Moses, *Jehovah* is more frequently used, and this, *El-shaddai*, very rarely; it bespeaks the almighty power of God, either,

(1.) As an avenger, from שׂדֵה *he laid waste*, so some; and they think God took this title from the destruction of the old world. This is countenanced by **#Isa 13:6; Joe 1:15.** Or,

(2.) As a benefactor, שׁ for אִשׁר *who*, and דַּי *sufficient.* He is a God that is enough; or, as our old English translation reads it here very significantly, *I am God all-sufficient.* Note, The God with whom we have to do is a God *that is enough.*

[1.] He is enough in himself; he is self-sufficient; he has every thing, and he needs not any thing.

[2.] He is enough to us, if we be in covenant with him: we have all in him, and we have enough in him, enough to satisfy our most enlarged desires, enough to supply the defect of every thing else, and to secure to us a happiness for our immortal souls. See **#Ps 16:5,6; 73:25.**

2. What God requires that we should be to him. The covenant is mutual: *Walk before me,*

and be thou perfect, that is, upright and sincere; for herein the covenant of grace is well-ordered that sincerity is our gospel perfection. Observe,

(1.) That to be religious is to walk before God in our integrity; it is to set God always before us, and to think, and speak, and act, in every thing, as those that are always under his eye. It is to have a constant regard to his word as our rule and to his glory as our end in all our actions, and to be continually in his fear. It is to be *inward with him*, in all the duties of religious worship, for in them particularly we walk before God (**#1Sa 2:30**), and to be *entire for him*, in all holy conversation. I know no religion but sincerity.

(2.) That upright walking with God is the condition of our interest in his all-sufficiency. If we neglect him, or dissemble with him, we forfeit the benefit and comfort of our relation to him.

(3.) A continual regard to God's all-sufficiency will have a great influence upon our upright walking with him.

Ver. 4.

The promise here is introduced with solemnity:

"As for me," says the great God, "behold, behold and admire it, behold and be assured of it, my covenant is with thee;"

as before (**#Ge 17:2**), *I will make my covenant*. Note, The covenant of grace is a covenant of God's own making; this he glories in (*as for me*), and so may we. Now here,

I. It is promised to Abraham that he should be a *father of many nations*; that is,

1. That his seed after the flesh should be very numerous, both in Isaac and Ishmael, as well as in the sons of Keturah: something extraordinary is doubtless included in this promise, and we may suppose that the event answered to it, and that there have been, and are, more of the children of men descended from Abraham than from any one man at an equal distance with him from Noah, the common root.
2. That all believers in every age should be looked upon as his spiritual seed, and that he should be called, not only *the friend of God*, but *the father of the faithful*. In this sense the apostle directs us to understand this promise, **#Ro 4:16,17**. He is the father of those in every nation that by faith enter into covenant with God, and (as the Jewish writers express it) *are gathered under the wings of the divine Majesty*.

II. In token of this his name was changed from *Abram*, a *high father*, to *Abraham*, the *father of a multitude*. This was,

1. To put an honour upon him. It is spoken of as the glory of the church that she shall be *called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name*, **#Isa 62:2**. Princes dignify their favourites by conferring new titles upon them; thus was Abraham dignified by him that is indeed the fountain of honour. All believers have a new name, **#Re 2:17**. Some think it added to the honour of Abraham's new name that a letter of the name *Jehovah* was inserted into it, as it was a disgrace to Jeconiah to have the first syllable of his name cut off, because it was the same as the first syllable of the sacred name, **#Jer 22:28**. Believers are named from Christ, **#Eph 3:15**.
2. To encourage and confirm the faith of Abraham. While he was childless perhaps even

his own name was sometimes an occasion of grief to him: why should he be called a high father who was not a father at all? But now that God had promised him a numerous issue, and had given him a name which signified so much, that name was his joy. Note: God calls things that are not as though they were. It is the apostle's observation upon this very thing, **#Ro 4:17**. He called Abraham *the father of a multitude* because he should prove to be so in due time, though as yet he had but one child.

Ver. 7.

Here is,

I. The continuance of the covenant, intimated in three things:--

1. It is established; not to be altered nor revoked. It is fixed, it is ratified, it is made as firm as the divine power and truth can make it.
2. It is entailed; it is a covenant, not with Abraham only (then it would die with him), but with his seed after him, not only his seed after the flesh, but his spiritual seed.
3. It is everlasting in the evangelical sense and meaning of it. The covenant of grace is everlasting. It is from everlasting in the counsels of it, and to everlasting in the consequences of it; and the external administration of it is transmitted with the seal of it to the seed of believers, and the internal administration of it by the Spirit of Christ's seed in every age.

II. The contents of the covenant: it is a covenant of promises, exceedingly great and precious promises. Here are two which indeed are all-sufficient:--

1. That God would be their God, **#Ge 17:7,8**. All the privileges of the covenant, all its joys and all its hopes, are summed up in this. A man needs desire no more than this to make him happy. What God is himself, that he will be to his people: his wisdom theirs, to guide and counsel them; his power theirs, to protect and support them; his goodness theirs, to supply and comfort them. What faithful worshippers can expect from the God they serve believers shall find in God as theirs. This is enough, yet not all.
2. That Canaan should be their everlasting possession, **#Ge 17:8**. God had before promised this land to Abraham and his seed, **#Ge 15:18**. But here, where it is promised for an everlasting possession, surely it must be looked upon as a type of heaven's happiness, that everlasting rest which remains for the people of God, **#Heb 4:9**. This is that better country to which Abraham had an eye, and the grant of which was that which answered to the vast extent and compass of that promise, that God would be to them a God; so that, if God had not prepared and designed this, he would have been ashamed to be called their God, **#Heb 11:16**. As the land of Canaan was secured to the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, so heaven is secured to all his spiritual seed, by a covenant, and for a possession, truly everlasting. The offer of this eternal life is made in the word, and confirmed by the sacraments, to all that are under the external administration of the covenant; and the earnest of it is given to all believers, **#Eph 1:14**. Canaan is here said to be the land wherein Abraham was a stranger; and the heavenly Canaan is a land to which we are strangers, for it does not yet appear what we shall be.

III. The token of the covenant, and that is circumcision, for the sake of which the

covenant is itself called the *covenant of circumcision*, [#Ac 7:8](#). It is here said to be the covenant which Abraham and his seed must keep, as a copy or counterpart, [#Ge 17:9,10](#). It is called a sign and seal ([#Ro 4:11](#)), for it was,

1. A confirmation to Abraham and his seed of those promises which were God's part of the covenant, assuring them that they should be fulfilled, that in due time Canaan would be theirs: and the continuance of this ordinance, after Canaan was theirs, intimates that these promises looked further to another Canaan, which they must still be in expectation of. See [#Heb 4:8](#).
2. An obligation upon Abraham and his seed to that duty which was their part of the covenant; not only to the duty of accepting the covenant and consenting to it, and putting away the corruption of the flesh (which were more immediately and primarily signified by circumcision), but, in general, to the observance of all God's commands, as they should at any time hereafter be intimated and made known to them; for circumcision made men *debtors to do the whole law*, [#Ga 5:3](#). Those who will have God to be to them a God must consent and resolve to be to him a people. Now,

(1.) Circumcision was a bloody ordinance; for all things by the law were purged with blood, [#Heb 9:22](#). See [#Ex 24:8](#). But, the blood of Christ being shed, all bloody ordinances are now abolished; circumcision therefore gives way to baptism.

(2.) It was peculiar to the males, though the women were also included in the covenant, for the man is the head of the woman. In our kingdom, the oath of allegiance is required only from men. Some think that the blood of the males only was shed in circumcision because respect was had in it to Jesus Christ and his blood.

(3.) It was the flesh of the foreskin that was to be cut off, because it is by ordinary generation that sin is propagated, and with an eye to the promised seed, who was to come from the loins of Abraham. Christ having not yet offered himself to us, God would have man to enter into covenant by the offering of some part of his own body, and no part could be better spared. It is a secret part of the body; for the true circumcision is that of the heart: this honour God put upon an uncomely part, [#1Co 12:23,24](#).

(4.) The ordinance was to be administered to children when they were eight days old, and not sooner, that they might gather some strength, to be able to undergo the pain of it, and that at least one sabbath might pass over them.

(5.) The children of the strangers, of whom the master of the family was the true domestic owner, were to be circumcised ([#Ge 17:12,13](#)), which looked favourable upon the Gentiles, who should in due time be brought into the family of Abraham, by faith. See [#Ga 3:14](#).

(6.) The religious observance of this institution was required under a very severe penalty, [#Ge 17:14](#). The contempt of circumcision was a contempt of the covenant; if the parents did not circumcise their children, it was at their peril, as in the case of Moses, [#Ex 4:24,25](#). With respect to those that were not circumcised in their infancy, if, when they grew up, they did not themselves come under this ordinance, God would surely reckon with them. If they cut not off the flesh of their foreskin, God would cut them off from their people. It is a dangerous thing to make light of divine institutions, and to live in the neglect of them.

Ver. 15.

Here is,

I. The promise made to Abraham of a son by *Sarai*, that son in whom the promise made to him should be fulfilled, that he should be the father of many nations; for *she also shall be a mother of nations, and kings of people shall be of her*, #Ge 17:16. Note,

1. God reveals the purposes of his goodwill to his people by degrees. God had told Abraham long before that he should have a son, but never till now that he should have a son by *Sarai*.
2. The blessing of the Lord makes fruitful, and adds no sorrow with it, no such sorrow as was in Hagar's case.

"I will bless her with the blessing of fruitfulness, and then thou shalt have a son of her."

3. Civil government and order are a great blessing to the church. It is promised, not only that *people*, but *kings of people*, should be of her; not a headless rout, but a well-modelled well-governed society.

II. The ratification of this promise was the change of *Sarai's* name into *Sarah* (#Ge 17:15), the same letter being added to her name that was to Abraham's, and for the same reasons. *Sarai* signifies my princess, as if her honour were confined to one family only. *Sarah* signifies a *princess*--namely, of *multitudes*, or signifying that from her should come the Messiah the prince, even the prince of the kings of the earth.

III. Abraham's joyful, thankful, entertainment of this gracious promise, #Ge 17:17. Upon this occasion he expressed,

1. Great humility: *He fell on his face*. Note, The more honours and favours God confers upon us the lower we should be in our own eyes, and the more reverent and submissive before God.
2. Great joy: He *laughed*. It was a laughter of delight, not of distrust. Note, Even the promises of a holy God, as well as his performances, are the joys of holy souls; there is the joy of faith as well as the joy of fruition. Now it was that Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day. Now he saw it and was glad (#Joh 8:56); for, as he saw heaven in the promise of Canaan, so he saw Christ in the promise of Isaac.
3. Great admiration: *Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old?* He does not here speak of it as at all doubtful (for we are sure that *he staggered not at the promise*, #Ro 4:20), but as very wonderful and that which could not be effected but by the almighty power of God, and as very *kind*, and a favour which was the more affecting and obliging for this, that it was extremely surprising, #Ps 126:1,2.

IV. Abraham's prayer for Ishmael: *O that Ishmael might live before thee!* #Ge 17:18. This he speaks, not as desiring that Ishmael might be preferred before the son he should have by Sarah; but, dreading lest he should be abandoned and forsaken of God, he puts up this petition on his behalf. Now that God is talking with him he thinks he has a very fair opportunity to speak a good word for Ishmael, and he will not let it slip. Note,

1. Though we ought not to prescribe to God, yet he gives us leave, in prayer, to be humbly free with him, and particular in making known our requests, #Php 4:6. Whatever is the matter of our care and fear should be spread before God in prayer.

2. It is the duty of parents to pray for their children, for all their children, as Job, who offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all, **#Job 1:5**. Abraham would not have it thought that, when God promised him a son by Sarah, which he so much desired, then his son by Hagar was forgotten; no, still he bears him upon his heart, and shows a concern for him. The prospect of further favours must not make us unmindful of former favours.
3. The great thing we should desire of God for our children is that they may live before him, that is, that they may be kept in covenant with him, and may have grace to walk before him in their uprightness. Spiritual blessings are the best blessings, and those for which we should be most earnest with God, both for ourselves and others. Those live well that live before God.

V. God's answer to his prayer; and it is an answer of peace. Abraham could not say that he sought God's face in vain.

1. Common blessings are secured to Ishmael (**#Ge 17:20**): *As for Ishmael, whom thou art in so much care about, I have heard thee; he shall find favour for thy sake; I have blessed him*, that is, I have many blessings in store for him.

(1.) His posterity shall be numerous: *I will multiply him exceedingly*, more than his neighbours. This is the fruit of the blessing, as that, **#Ge 1:28**.

(2.) They shall be considerable: *Twelve princes shall he beget*. We may charitably hope that spiritual blessings also were bestowed upon him, though the visible church was not brought out of his loins and the covenant was not lodged in his family. Note, Great plenty of outward good things is often given to those children of godly parents who are born after the flesh, for their parents' sake.

2. Covenant blessings are reserved for Isaac, and appropriated to him, **#Ge 17:19,21**. If Abraham, in his prayer for Ishmael, meant that he would have the covenant made with him, and the promised seed to come from him, then God did not answer him in the letter, but in that which was equivalent, nay, which was every way better.

(1.) God repeats to him the promise of a son by Sarah: *She shall bear thee a son indeed*. Note, Even true believers need to have God's promises doubled and repeated to them, that they may have strong consolation, **#Heb 6:18**. Again, Children of the promise are children indeed.

(2.) He names that child--calls him *Isaac, laughter*, because Abraham rejoiced in spirit when this son was promised him. Note, If God's promises be our joy, his mercies promised shall in due time be our *exceeding* joy. Christ will be laughter to those that look for him; those that now rejoice in hope shall shortly rejoice in having that which they hope for: this is laughter that is not mad.

(3.) He entails the covenant upon that child: *I will establish my covenant with him*. Note, God takes whom he pleases into covenant with himself, according to the good pleasure of his will. See **#Ro 9:8,18**. Thus was the covenant settled between God and Abraham, with its several limitations and remainders, and then the conference ended: *God left off talking with him*, and the vision disappeared, *God went up from Abraham*. Note, Our communion with God here is broken and interrupted; in heaven it will be a continual and everlasting feast.

We have here Abraham's obedience to the law of circumcision. He himself and all his family were circumcised, so receiving the token of the covenant and distinguishing themselves from other families, that had no part nor lot in the matter.

1. It was an implicit obedience: He did as *God had said to him*, and did not ask why or wherefore. God's will was not only a law to him, but a reason; he did it because God told him.
2. It was a speedy obedience: *In the self-same day*, #Ge 17:23,26. Sincere obedience is not dilatory, #Ps 119:60. While the command is yet sounding in our ears, and the sense of duty is fresh, it is good to apply ourselves to it immediately, lest we deceive ourselves by putting it off to a more convenient season.
3. It was a universal obedience: He did not circumcise his family and excuse himself, but set them an example; nor did he take the comfort of the seal of the covenant to himself only, but desired that all his might share with him in it. This is a good example to masters of families; they and their houses must serve the Lord. Though God's covenant was not established with Ishmael, yet he was circumcised; for children of believing parents, as such, have a right to the privileges of the visible church, and the seals of the covenant, whatever they may prove afterwards. Ishmael is blessed, and therefore circumcised.
4. Abraham did this though much might be objected against it. Though circumcision was painful,--though to grown men it was shameful,--though, while they were sore and unfit for action, their enemies might take advantage against them, as Simeon and Levi did against the Shechemites,--though Abraham was ninety nine years old, and had been justified and accepted of God long since,--though so strange a thing done religiously might be turned to his reproach by the Canaanite and the Perizzite that dwelt then in the land,--yet God's command was sufficient to answer these and a thousand such objection: what God requires we must do, not *conferring with flesh and blood*.