

## Genesis 17:1-18:15 – The Covenant of Circumcision

### Review

Last time, we discussed the story of Abram taking Sarai's Egyptian maidservant Hagar as wife and conceiving Ishmael by her. When Hagar ran away, the angel of the Lord appeared to her beside a spring and told her to return to Abram and Sarai, saying that He would bring forth a multitude through her son Ishmael. Hagar recognized that it was God Himself who appeared to her and renamed the spring **בְּעַר לַחַי רֹאִי** *b'ēr laḥay rō'î* – well of the living One who sees me. She returned to Abram's household and gave birth to his son Ishmael when Abram was 86 years old.

Since Genesis 16:7 is the first instance in God's Word where we find the phrase “the angel of the Lord,” we spent some time considering its meaning. We learned that sometimes this refers to one of God's created messengers and servants like Gabriel and Michael, while other times “the angel of the Lord” refers to God Himself. We mentioned some rules of thumb through which we can usually determine one meaning of the other in a particular passage:

1. If the “angel” did or promised something that only God can do, the “angel” was God Himself.
2. If the person to whom the “angel” clearly recognized that the “angel” was God, then we can safely assume that as well.
3. If the person to whom the “angel” appeared worshipped the “angel,” and was admonished by the angel not to worship, then the angel was one of God's created servants. If they were allowed to continue in this worship, then the “angel” was God Himself.

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### The Covenant of Circumcision

*<sup>1</sup>When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; [אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי 'ēl šaday] walk before me, and be blameless, <sup>2</sup>that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”* Genesis 17:1-2 (ESV)

As we read along through the story of Abram, if we don't pay close attention, the juxtaposition of this verse with the previous one (Genesis 16:16) obscures somewhat the passage of time between the birth of Ishmael we read about in Genesis 16:16 and this appearance of God to Abram we read about in Genesis 17:1. But recall that Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born to Hagar – Sarai's Egyptian maidservant (Genesis 16:16). So, 13 years had passed since Ishmael's birth before God appeared to Abram again when he was ninety-nine.

In Genesis 17:1 we see the first appearance of **אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי** *'ēl šaday* – one of God's Names meaning God most powerful or almighty. God's command for Abram to “...*be blameless*...” isn't so much a state of being as a call to action. The Hebrew here might also be translated “become blameless.” This is a subtle encouragement from God to Abram and to us. As Christ followers, we are fully justified before God despite our sinful nature because God has imputed Jesus' righteousness upon us in response to our faith in the Gospel just as He credited Abram with righteousness in response to his belief in God's promise to make a great nation from Abram and give them all the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:6).

But our justification in the moment we believe is just the beginning of the process of our sanctification through which God is perfecting us into the image of Jesus – God the Son. By the power of His Spirit working within our hearts, God is faithful to mold us into that image of Jesus' perfection so that one day we may truly become blameless like Him.

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But in the meantime, Genesis 17:2 gives us a subtle warning. If we persist in our sin and don't surrender our wills completely to Jesus' lordship over our hearts, our sin still partially separates us from God – preventing Him from fulfilling His covenant with us. He can only complete the process of our sanctification if we allow Him to do so.

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***<sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be called Abram, [אֲבְרָם 'abrām – exalted father] but your name shall be Abraham [אֲבְרָהָם 'abrāhām - father of a multitude], for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup>And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”*** Genesis 17:3-8(ESV)

Recall that God's covenants with mankind always include a promise from God and sometimes a command from God for mankind's part in the “bargain.” Also, God's covenants are usually symbolized with some sort of formal initiation that serves to seal the covenant and acts as a remembrance for us of the covenant we have made with God. God formalized this “Abrahamic” covenant in two ways – first by changing Abram's (אֲבְרָם 'abrām – *exalted father*) name to Abraham (אֲבְרָהָם 'abrāhām - *father of a multitude*).

God promised here to make Abraham's descendants great nations from which kings would arise. God has certainly fulfilled that part of the promise not only in the nation of Israel, but also through Ishmael's descendants. But what about the second part of the promise – to give Abraham's offspring all the land of Canaan forever? As we have seen, Israel has never yet possessed all the land of promise, and even the small portions of it that they did once possess, have been repeatedly seized back from them by both the indigenous peoples whom the Israelites supplanted, and by many other conquerors who came in from outside the land throughout history. Why?

Just as God seems to have only partially and temporarily fulfilled this promise over the years, so Israel has only partially and temporarily honored and served the one true and living God who made this promise to their forefather Abraham. In fact, Israel's dalliances into idolatry led eventually to their Roman conquerors casting them almost entirely from the land of promise into the wide world. They were so dispersed that most Christian theologians until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century believed that Israel would never return to the land despite this promise from God to Abraham, and despite the vision of Israel's resurrection God showed to Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37).

Yet we know and trust that God **always** fulfills His promises perfectly. Thus, the apostle Paul wrote...

***<sup>25</sup>Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup>And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,***

***“The Deliverer will come from Zion,***

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*he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;*  
*27“and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”*

*28As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. 29For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. 33Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* Romans 11:25-33 (ESV)

Whenever I read this passage in Romans, I am struck again with awe at the thoroughness, the beautiful symmetry, and the utter perfection of God’s plan of salvation – that perfect plan conceived in the mind of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit even before the foundation of the world!

**ASIDE** – In Romans 11:26-27, Paul quotes from some prophetic writing, but this quote is not found in the Old Testament.

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*9And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”* Genesis 17:9-14 (ESV)

God’s covenants, as we know, usually include a command from God to be fulfilled by mankind in return for God’s fulfillment of His covenant promises. God’s covenant promises are things only God can do – the most important being His promise of eternal life for all who believe Jesus’ Gospel and follow Him as Lord and Savior. Noah’s family’s part in his covenant with God was to “**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.**” (Genesis 9:1). Abram’s part in the covenant we studied in Genesis 15 was simply to believe the promise that God reiterates here in Genesis 17:1-16; just as our part in the final perfect covenant in Jesus’ blood is to simply believe His promise of eternal life.

Here in God’s covenant with Abraham, He commanded that all males be circumcised. Circumcision serves not only as mankind’s part of the bargain but also as a reminder of the covenant among the people with whom God made this covenant. All males who are Abraham’s descendants bear the mark of this covenant on their physical body as a reminder of the covenant. Jewish men take pride in their

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circumcision as a sign of their devotion to God, even referring to themselves as “The Circumcision” and to those outside Judaism as “The Uncircumcision.”

But in some ways, this is quite tragic. The most important promise of mankind to God in this Abrahamic covenant is that God will be our God. But most people put their trust in some sort of work like circumcision rather than obeying God’s greatest commandment.

***5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*** Deuteronomy 6:5 (ESV)

In the State of Israel today, virtually all Jewish males are circumcised, yet nearly half of them identify themselves as secular or non-religious. Throughout history, the Jews have trusted in the fact of their physical circumcision as a sort of binding upon God to fulfill His part of the Abrahamic bargain. But God is not to be hoodwinked. He knows the very depths of our hearts.

Similarly, many if not most professing “Christians” believe that some sort of work or ceremony is what saves us from eternal judgment and condemnation in our sins. Some believe that they are guaranteed eternal life in Heaven because they were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit when they were infants – trusting in the ceremony and ignoring Jesus’ clear teachings and warnings to Nicodemus.

***3b...“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** John 3:3b (ESV)

***16“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*** John 3:16-18 (ESV)

Others entrust the eternal wellbeing of our souls to the fact that we give tithes to the church, or regularly attend worship services, or teach Sunday school, or go on mission trips – all the while neglecting the critical matter of true faith in Jesus’ Gospel and full commitment of our lives under His lordship.

In answer to the false accusation that he had blasphemed against the temple and the law, the Christian martyr Stephen spoke of those who rely upon circumcision of the flesh while being “uncircumcised” at heart.

***51“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*** Acts 7:51-53 (ESV)

Stephen’s admonishment to the unrepentant Jews of his day applies equally to both modern secular Jews who are circumcised in their flesh but whose hearts are far from God, and to professing “Christians” who put our reliance in works and words rather than pouring ourselves out to God in heartfelt devotion and prayer for His mercy, forgiveness, and eternal salvation.

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***15And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai [שָׂרַי *sāray* – princess] your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah [שָׂרָה *sārâ* – noblewoman] shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*** Genesis 17:15-16 (ESV)

Here at last – almost 14 years after Abram and Sarai (שָׂרַי *sāray* – princess) decided to “help God along” with His promise to give Abram an heir who would come from his own body, God clarified that the promised heir would come from Abraham’s wife Sarah (שָׂרָה *sārâ* – noblewoman), not from her Egyptian maidservant Hagar.

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***17Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” 18And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”*** Genesis 17:17-18 (ESV)

I find this passage quite perturbing. Here was Abraham whose belief in God’s words of promise was credited as righteousness to him by God. Yet clearly Abraham didn’t believe God could fulfill this promise in the way He had foretold. Abraham was still trying to promote the scheme that he and Sarai had hatched using Hagar as their surrogate nearly 14 years before.

This is a testament to the sovereignty of God and the immutability of His plan of salvation. God determined even before the foundation of the world to use Abraham and Sarah as His instruments to bring forth Jesus His מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* for the salvation of all mankind **despite** Abraham and Sarah’s best efforts to the contrary!

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***19God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac [יִצְחָק *yishāq* – he laughs]. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*** Genesis 17:19 (ESV)

How wonderfully patient is our God. In God’s place, I would probably have told Abraham, “Sit down, shut up, and listen for a change!” Instead, God quietly explained to Abraham what he needed to know about the final, everlasting covenant between God and man that He eventually established in Jesus’ blood. Not only had God pre-determined to establish His plan of salvation through Isaac’s descendants rather than Ishmael’s, He knew beforehand that Abraham would laugh at the idea, and thus Isaac (יִצְחָק *yishāq* – he laughs) would receive a fitting name.

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***20As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. 21But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”***

Genesis 17:20-21 (ESV)

Lest we be tempted to condemn Ishmael and his descendants who have always been at enmity with God’s chosen people Israel, notice here that God blessed him, even knowing what was to come. Recall

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that God had foretold this enmity to Ishmael's mother Hagar even before he was born (Genesis 16:12). The twelve princes God mentioned to Abraham here are listed in Genesis 25:13-16.

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***22**When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. **23**Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. **24**Abraham was ninety-nine years old 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**That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. **27**And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. Genesis 17:22-27 (ESV)*

Abraham fulfilled his part of this covenant as soon as God left him. This is reminiscent of what Jesus taught about obedience.

***9**As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. **10**If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. John 15:9-10 (ESV)*

Over the course of history, Israel has remained faithful to this Abrahamic covenant – at least in terms of their physical circumcision. Sadly, Israel and the world at large are less faithful – indeed almost totally faithless – in our obedience to God's other commandments. Consequently, for the most part, we do not abide in the Father's love by our obedience. This is the very reason that Jesus – God the Son Himself came and dwelt in the flesh of a man, lived a perfectly sinless life, and gave His **own** life on the cross to save all mankind out of death in our sins.

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***18:1**And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. **2**He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth **3**and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. **4**Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, **5**while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." **6**And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." **7**And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. **8**Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. **9**They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." Genesis 18:1-9 (ESV)*

This next appearance of God to Abraham must have been less than a year after the time we just saw in Genesis 17 because God had promised then that the birth of Isaac would be "**...at this time next**

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**year.**” In fact, it must have been very shortly after that when God appeared to Abraham here because Sarah did not even yet know she was (or soon would be) pregnant as we shall learn.

Of course, the three “men” who appeared to Abraham were not men at all. Two of them were angels whom God was sending to Sodom. One was God Himself once again. Notice that Abraham bowed himself to them in worship and he was not chastised for it. This may also be another instance in which Moses repeats himself as he did in Genesis 1-2 and in Genesis 10-11. As we know, Biblical narratives are sometimes non-linear. More likely though, this was a separate appearance.

In this short passage, we find a summary of hospitality in ancient Hebrew culture. The people of the Middle East continue in a similar tradition of hospitality toward strangers even today. Canaan is a desert country as is the entire Middle Eastern region. Fresh water is a precious commodity, so offering water to strangers is a token of welcome. Of course, sharing food together is another element of hospitality that is universal among all people. Abraham mentioning a “morsel” of bread as an encouragement for his visitors to remain with him is quite funny. Another characteristic of Middle Eastern hospitality is its excess – often accompanied by ironic humility as it is here. The three seahs (one ephah) of fine flour that Abraham called for amounted to about 5 gallons (see the Biblical Weights and Measures table [here](#)). Sarah would have been busy for quite a while baking cakes from all that flour! Of course, even a small calf would have been more meat than all of them could eat in many days. Notice also that Abraham and his family did not eat until after his “guests” had eaten their fill.

While we’re on the subject, let’s briefly talk about the concept of “firstfruits” in our offerings to God and to our fellow people. God’s Word emphasizes that our offerings should be our absolute best, not our leftovers and cast-offs. By offering our best, we communicate our love and respect for those we serve. This concept is so important that God codified a requirement for Israel to offer the firstfruits of their harvest into the Law of Moses and ordained the early summer Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) for this offering. By offering our firstfruits, we not only affirm our gratitude to God for His manifest blessings, but we also show our trust in Him to provide for our ongoing needs. Today, we mostly give of our finances rather than produce. Our tithes and offerings should be first on our list of priorities rather than what we have left over at the end of the month. Similarly, we should schedule our devotions and works for God’s Kingdom at the beginning of our day, not as a brief prayer and scripture reading just before we go to sleep. This is why Jesus said we should seek **first** the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). In this, we show God our love and respect daily as we take up our crosses in His service.

***9Honor the LORD with your wealth  
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;  
10then your barns will be filled with plenty,  
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*** Proverbs 3:9-10 (ESV)

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***10The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. 11Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. 12So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” 13The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ 14Is anything too hard*** [אֵלֹהִים]

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*pālā* **for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”** <sup>15</sup>**But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”**

Genesis 18:10-15 (ESV)

Of course, this is why God chose Isaac (יִשְׁחָק **yiṣḥāq – he laughs**) as the name for Abraham’s and Sarah’s promised son. A young child’s laughter is perhaps the most gladdening sound we can hear. It is a beautiful name for a child. Note that Abraham’s and Sarah’s laughter do not imply disbelief of God’s promise that Sarah would have a child.

It had been 24 years since God first showed Abram the land of Canaan and promised to give it to Abram’s descendants (Genesis 12:7). Recall that when God reiterated this promise later, saying that Abram’s heir would come from his own body, Abram believed God’s promise, so God credited Abram’s faith to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

So here in this passage when God finally gave them a specific time when He would fulfill the promise, their laughter was just from elation and pure giddiness that their long wait for the promised heir would soon be over. Compare their eager anticipation of Isaac’s coming to the outright disbelief of John the Baptist’s father Zechariah when he was given a similar promise of a son in his old age (Luke 1:5-22). Contrast God’s gentle chiding of Abraham and Sarah for their laughter with Gabriel’s chastisement of Zechariah’s disbelief by striking him mute until the day of John’s circumcision.

Finally, take a closer look at Genesis 18:14. The Hebrew word **נָפֵל** *pālā’* translated here as “hard” can also mean wonderful, extraordinary, marvelous, or difficult to understand. Throughout God’s Word, we find Him demonstrating His unlimited power through His miracles, like parting the Red Sea to rescue His people Israel from annihilation by Pharaoh’s armies, raising Lazarus, Jairus’ daughter, and the widow of Nain’s son from the dead, healing the blind, lame, deaf, leprous, and mute, and yes – the miraculous birth of an heir to a childless couple who had given up hope of having an heir.

Yet of all God’s miracles, the greatest of all is His birth to a virgin into the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth to rescue all mankind out of death in our sins.

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## Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we’ll look at God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.