

Circumcision

Bible Background • [GENESIS 17](#)
Printed Text • [GENESIS 17:1-14](#)
Devotional Reading • [PSALM 105:1-11](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EXPLORE God’s promises to Abraham; APPRAISE the value of outward signs for God’s people; and DEVELOP ways to “walk before [God] and be blameless.”



Alan had been known as a ladies man since high school. All of his friends joked with him that he dated so many women in so little time that he would probably never settle down. Every one of his relationships was fun but short. But then he met Candace. Alan had dated a lot of women, but Candace stood out from them all. Candace was an intelligent, confident, kind-hearted woman who let him know during their first date that she planned to remain celibate until marriage, and that if he wasn’t interested in pursuing a committed relationship, he should date someone else. Alan was stunned. He had never experienced a woman being so straightforward with him, and he knew he could not smooth-talk his way into keeping her around as he had with other women.

Alan met up with his good friend John, who was happily married, and shared his feelings. “I’ve never felt so positive and attracted around a woman,” Alan confessed.

John advised that if Alan felt like a relationship with Candace was worth pursuing, he should let go of the “dating around” and keep taking her out. “Who knows, God could have just had you meet your future wife, and if she is, it’s definitely worth letting go of the player life,” John remarked. Alan heeded John’s advice and began to think very seriously about his future.

God desires the very best for us, but obtaining His best requires letting go. What things in your life has God asked you to let go of in order to obtain His best?

Keep in Mind

“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” ([Genesis 17:10](#)^L).

KJV

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.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

3 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.

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.

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

7 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.

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.

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.

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.

NLT

Genesis 17:1  When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai— 'God Almighty.' Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life.

2 I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to give you countless descendants."

3 At this, Abram fell face down on the ground. Then God said to him,

4 “This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations!

5 What’s more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations.

6 I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them!

7 “I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

8 And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God.”

9 Then God said to Abraham, “Your responsibility is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility.

10 This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised.

11 You must cut off the flesh of your foreskin as a sign of the covenant between me and you.

12 From generation to generation, every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day of his birth. This applies not only to members of your family but also to the servants born in your household and the foreign-born servants whom you have purchased.

13 All must be circumcised. Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant.

14 Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant.”

The People, Places, and Times

Abraham. Abraham was originally from Ur, which was Chaldean territory in modern-day Iraq. He was the son of Terah, who was a descendant of Shem, one of Noah’s sons. Noah had declared the Lord God’s blessing over Shem who, with his brother, covered Noah when he was naked ([Genesis 9:18–26](#)^L). Later, God would declare an even greater blessing over Abraham.

Almighty God. This is another name ascribed to God’s nature and character: El meaning “God,” and Shaddai meaning the “Powerful One” or “Mighty One.” The term connotes God’s majesty as One who is self-sufficient. God’s covenant was moral and ethical in character because He was more than able to swear by Himself and honor His word.

What was the relevance of God identifying Himself as “Almighty God” before choosing to reveal the covenant to Abraham?

Background

The Lord God called out Abram, set him apart from his kindred, and promised to bless him. God said He would give Abram land and make him a great nation ([Genesis 12:1–3^L](#)). Abram believed and set out on a journey to follow God’s instructions.

Abram and his wife, Sarai, were childless, and in their culture it was to Sarai’s shame that she did not bear Abram a son. The word of the Lord came to Abram a second time, and God promised Abram an heir from his own body, assuring Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars ([Genesis 15:1–5^L](#)). Abram believed God, and God determined that it was equal to righteousness ([Genesis 15:6^L](#)).

To reassure Abram, the Lord made a covenant with him and ratified it through the sacrifice of a calf, a female goat, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abram split the calf and the female goat and God passed through the sacrificed animals to confirm His oath. Then, God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep. During this time, He gave Abram a vision of his descendants, declaring to him the land they would possess as a part of this covenant ([Genesis 15:9–21^L](#)).

As time passed and Abram and Sarai experienced more childless years, they thought that this child of promise would come through other means, so they attempted to help God (Genesis 16). However, God’s promise to Abram that his descendants would be vast meant that he and Sarai would have their own son. God appeared to Abram again, changed his name to Abraham and Sarai’s name to Sarah ([Genesis 17:5^L](#), [15^L](#)). Also, God explained to Abraham his responsibility in this covenant: Abraham and every male child of his descendants were to be circumcised ([Genesis 17:10–14^L](#)).

At-A-Glance

1. Covenant Renewed ([Genesis 17:1–8^L](#))
2. Covenant Symbolized (vv. 9–14)

In Depth

1. Covenant Renewed ([Genesis 17:1–8^L](#))

During this encounter, God appears to Abram to speak His prophetic promise over his life and the lives of his descendants. In the previous chapter, Sarai convinced her husband to have a child through her Egyptian slave, Hagar, because in that culture a female servant could be a second wife. Her children would be the possession of their owner. God comes to Abram when he is ninety-nine and calls him to be fully devoted to the Almighty God. God was calling Abram to serve the one true God only, and He would make a nation through him that would do the same.

In the process, God changes Abram’s name, which means “exalted father,” to Abraham, meaning “father of many nations.” God declares that He will make Abraham exceedingly fruit-ful, in spite of his mistakes. He declares that kings will come from Abraham’s lineage and that He will keep

this covenant with Abraham and his descendants forever. God makes a promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan as their possession and that He would be their God. By faith in Jesus Christ, those included as "Abraham's seed" are extended, and we receive the promise of salvation ([Galatians 3:6-9](#)^L).

Why do you think God decided it was necessary to renew His covenant with Abraham again?

2. Covenant Symbolized (vv. 9–14)

God institutes circumcision as a physical sign to mark that Abraham and his offspring are chosen and set apart from the other pagan cultures as His people. God commanded the generations after Abraham to walk blamelessly before Him by living under His rule and keeping this covenant. Circumcision entails that male children, eight days after birth, have the foreskin cut away as a token of their relationship with God. Moreover, God's command extends to male slaves, either born or purchased from foreigners, who would become a part of their household; they too must also adhere to the covenant.

God contends that anyone who does not comply with cutting away his foreskin is not His and would be cut off from His people. Circumcision is a painful process, but the outward sign of God's promise. Today as an outward sign of inward change, God calls His people to cut away our old nature and trust Him completely as a sign of the new covenant. Abraham believed God, and he was credited with righteousness. When we believe God and receive the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, taking on His righteousness, we too are counted righteous, set apart, and receive covenant blessings ([Romans 4:22-25](#)^L).

How can one explain the process of a spiritual circumcision of the heart as necessary for salvation?

Search the Scriptures

1. Does God's promise to Abraham apply to believers now in any way? Why or why not ([Genesis 17:1-8](#)^L)?
2. Why would the Lord require those who were foreign born or household servants to be circumcised (vv. 12–14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why do you think God changed Abram's name to Abraham?
2. What was the significance of the physical mark of this covenant?

Lesson in Our Society

God requires those of us who follow Him to cut away sinful activities by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to Him as our reasonable act of worship ([Romans 12:1](#)^L). The cutting away

of our hearts in this context is to live a life that is pleasing to God, obeying His commands to love Him and others. Jesus tells us that these two commandments fulfill the Law and the prophets ([Matthew 22:34–40](#)^L). Like Abraham, we too are marked and are able to inherit God's promise.

Throughout history, and even today, people of African descent are often marginalized and perceived as inferior to those of lighter hues, but God is no respecter of persons, meaning He does not play favorites (cf. [Acts 10:34](#)^L). God has blessed and gifted those of the African Diaspora to succeed against the odds and to make unparalleled contributions toward the advancements of society.

How significant is the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., in ensuring that our contributions to society are acknowledged and documented for future generations?

Make It Happen

Christianity is not just a religion. It's a relationship. Being a Christian means living differently than the world. A commitment to God in Christ requires sacrifice. Sacrifice is hard, but the reward far exceeds the cost.

- This week, reflect on the symbols of your commitment to your relationship with God and consider what membership in His family means for your life.
- Examine if your faith is reflected in what you value, how you spend your time, your talent, your treasure, and how you treat others.
- Prayerfully list the ways that God has blessed you because of your faith in Jesus Christ and your inheritance of the Abrahamic blessing.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do?

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned.

More Light on the Text

Genesis 17:1–14^L

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.

This is the fifth time God appears to Abram. The first time, we are told that God commanded him to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)^L). In this first appearance, the Lord also promised him personal blessings. The second time, God gave him promises concerning his descendants (12:7). The third time, God spoke to him to show him the Promised Land (13:14–17). The fourth time, God encouraged him, promised him an heir, and revealed the vastness and multitudes of his descendants using comparisons with natural phenomena to enable him to comprehend the magnitude of this promise (15:1–5). These past interactions between God and Abram had established a relationship between them. In his interactions with God, Abram had not fully comprehended His personality. All he knew of God was what he received from Him: promises, commands, relations, and the God-established covenant. Now, when Abram is ninety-nine years old, God declares His mighty power.

Though the Abrahamic covenant is considered to be unilateral, God's proclamation, "I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect," is an exhortation to live in light of the blessings of the covenant. This declaration is God's first step toward revealing His personality to Abram. The word translated "Almighty" is *shaddai* (Heb. *shad-DAH-ee*), meaning "sufficient" or "all-powerful." God assures Abram that He is all-powerful and sufficient for him. This assurance should allay his fears and give him hope that all the promises made to him will be fulfilled. This declaration is meant to make Abram aware that he is dealing with the only true God who is all-powerful and all-sufficient—God with incomparable sovereignty. The word *halak* (Heb. *haw-LAK*) literally means "to go" or "to walk," with reference to the movement made by the feet. In this Scripture, it is used in a figurative sense to refer to personal behavior. Thus, it means to behave oneself. The verb form used here further implies that this behavior is not just a one-time act, but a repetitive action. Abraham should walk—and keep on walking—before God. This conveys the idea of continually living righteously or responsibly. God is charging Abram to walk uprightly before Him all his days.

Because Abram is from a pagan background (as one who lived in Ur of the Chaldees, which was a center of moon worship), God gives him this charge. Moreover, the Lord had called him away from his kindred and out of his country, and Abram becomes a chosen person through whom God intends to reveal His mighty power. Today, those of us who express faith like Abraham have been called out of the world to live a sanctified life in view of greater hopes—the manifestation of God's glory.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. 3 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.

God establishes a covenant with Abram. This covenant comprises great personal promises made to Abram. Prior to this time, God had made these promises to him. The word translated "make" is *nathan* (Heb. *naw-TAN*) and means "to give, bestow, grant, or entrust." This is in particular

reference to the establishment of a covenant that was originated by God. This covenant is a gift from God to Abram. As mentioned before, this covenant is generally considered to be unilateral since it was first declared by God without any conditions attached. However, verse 1 adds a second element to it, effectively making the covenant bilateral.

Here, we can identify three of the four elements present in a covenant: parties, conditions, and results. God and Abram, certainly, are the parties involved here. Faithful obedience was the condition required by God in this covenant with Abram. The results are the promises to multiply Abram exceedingly and make him a father of many nations.

Abram fell on his face while God talked with him, expressing total submission and a willingness to obey Him. The promise to multiply Abram exceedingly transcends the promise of making him into a great nation ([Genesis 12:2](#)^L). The former promise refers to Abram's seed, through Isaac and Jacob, becoming the Hebrew nation. The latter promise speaks of the nations that were to come out of him, apart from the nation of Israel—peoples, and nations that were to be his descendants through Hagar (16:15) and Keturah (25:1–2). God expresses a willingness to multiply Abram exceedingly, which provokes in Abram a willingness to obey God.

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.

Abram means “high father” or “my father is exalted.” This meaning is also conveyed in other ancient languages such as Old Babylonian, ancient Egyptian, ancient South Arabic, and Ugaritic. Even in these different languages, the name carried a similar meaning; that is, the name was translated including the word “divine,” to render it as “my divine father is exalted.” Abraham means “father of a multitude.” This new name incorporates God's plan and purpose for Abraham; it points to his destiny, and reflects God's promise for him.

The word translated “father” is *ab* (Heb. AWB), which accounts for the first two letters of the names Abram and Abraham. Abram had been accorded the status of a father even while he was a pagan, but the significance of his fatherhood becomes different now that Almighty God is his God. God makes him a father of many nations. This implies a change in his personality and destiny; having been appointed, called, or ordained to be a father of many nations, he has been elevated to a higher status than that of a “high father” in a pagan context. “Father” also means “founder” and “patriarch.” This promise has been fulfilled over the ages. He is the father of the Hebrew nation through the seed of the promise, Isaac. However, he is also the father of the Ishmaelites, Midianites, Edomites, Shuhites, and many others. His descendants grew into an exceedingly wide circle of peoples, kings, princes, and nations. His fatherhood continues down through a long line of physical descendant progenitors, and also through a “family” that shares his spiritual heritage. All believers who have faith in God are called Abraham's children: “Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham” ([Galatians 3:7](#)^L).

The change of name indicates an elevation and possibly a rebirth of sorts. It typifies the New Testament experience in which our personalities and appellations or titles change at our rebirth by the Holy Spirit in Christ. We become children of God, for example, saints, the redeemed, kings, and priests.

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

This is one of the promises God gave to Abraham that is similar to the promise we find in [Genesis 12:2](#). These two promises pertain to nations. While the [Genesis 12:2](#) promise refers to one nation (the nation of Israel) in particular, this [Genesis 17:6](#) promise refers to the other nations of the world. This promise has two referents. First, it refers to Abraham's physical progeny through Ishmael, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah, who formed various peoples and nations, with their kings. Second, and most importantly, it refers to all believers of all nations who are saved in Jesus Christ. The natural ancestry of Jesus is traced to Abraham ([Matthew 1:1–16](#)), and believers are kings and priests unto God ([Revelation 5:10](#)); they are coheirs with Christ ([Romans 8:17](#); [Galatians 3:29](#)).

7 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.

God reveals the extent of His covenant with Abraham. This covenant is established with Abraham, his immediate offspring, and subsequent offspring even unto distant generations. It is intended to be everlasting. The Hebrew word *olam* (Heb. *oh-LOM*) comes from the word for “concealed,” thinking of time as though stretching beyond the vanishing point on a horizon, suggesting time out of mind or eternity. This can be translated as a “long duration” or refer strictly to eternal time past or future. Here it is translated as “everlasting,” indicating that the covenant would exist continuously upon its inauguration. God's purpose is to have a people descend from Abraham who will perpetuate faith in Him and service to Him—a people to whom He will be God for eternity, who will at no time discontinue their service to Him but take Him as their God permanently. Thus, Abraham was to be the patriarch of a nation made up of God's own people. As the patriarch who acknowledged the true God, Abraham became His first prophet ([Genesis 20:7](#)).

The religion of Abraham was supposed to be an expression of faith and obedience to God, characterized by the practice of righteousness, compliance with divinely stipulated laws and ceremonial practices, and recognition of the prophets, priests, and judges as representatives of God. But in the course of time, alien religious beliefs and practices involving other gods arose, claiming to originate from Abraham. The Ishmaelites and Midianites, for instance, introduced major religious elements that became prevalent in the area. Currently, most Arab nations follow Islam—a religion whose founder, Mohammed, also claimed to be greatly influenced by Abraham.

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 ever-lasting possession; and I will be their God.

Abraham's nomadic life would be brought to an end by possessing the land where he dwelt as a stranger. God promises to turn the immigrant Abraham into a possessor of a foreign land. The Hebrew word *erets* (EH-rets) is translated “land” or “earth”; here it means “country” or “territory.” By covenant right, Abraham possesses the Canaanite country, but the twelve tribes of Israel achieved actual possession.

The twelve sons of Jacob eventually became the twelve tribes who settled in the country of the Canaanites, a land flowing with milk and honey. God actually dispossessed the original inhabitants of the land to give it to Abraham's descendants in fulfillment of His covenant. God said it was to be an everlasting possession and therefore meant to be a permanent home for the children of Abraham.

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.

Now God exhorts Abraham to not only keep the covenant himself but also for his seed after him to keep the same covenant. The stipulation is that Abraham would be circumcised as well as those who would come after him as a sign of membership in the covenant community. Circumcision was a widespread practice at the time among many different cultures in the area. What distinguishes the circumcision practice of Abraham and his male descendants is that it is a sign of covenant relationship between them and God Himself.

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.

Circumcision was a reminder of the covenant between Abraham and God as well as between those descendants of Abraham who were circumcised as well. The command to wait eight days probably stems from the ancient practice of waiting a certain number of days to confirm that the infant will live. Among rabbis, the number seven represents the complete and finite, while eight points toward the miraculous and matters of faith. Therefore, circumcision on the eighth day symbolizes that the child has entered into a community founded on faith.

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.

Circumcision would not only be required for those who were physical descendants, but also those born in the house or servants bought with Abraham's money. This means that the covenant extended to every male within the nation of Israel. All of the men were to show this sign of belonging to the Lord.

Say It Correctly

El Shaddai. **EL** sha-**DIE**.

Betwixt. bih-**TWIK**-st.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Sarah, Mother of Nations
([Genesis 17:15–17](#)^L)

TUESDAY

Ishmael, Father of a Nation
([Genesis 17:20–22](#)^L)

WEDNESDAY

All Males of Abraham's Household
Circumcised
([Genesis 17:23–27](#)^L)

THURSDAY

Circumcision Event Remembered
([Acts 7:1–8](#)^L)

FRIDAY

God's Promise Realized Through Faith
([Romans 4:13–25](#)^L)

SATURDAY

Jesus, Mediator of a Better Covenant
([Hebrews 8:1–8](#)^L)

SUNDAY

God's Covenant with Abraham Reaffirmed
([Genesis 17:1–14](#)^L)