

## *“The Sign of Faith”*

*Genesis 17*

*Dr. Jerry Nelson*

*www.soundliving.org*

*Do you have a relationship with God? What kind of relationship is it? If I ask if you have a relationship with your boss, you would know what I mean. I would be asking if you know him. I would be asking if you converse with each other. I would be asking if you act toward each other in certain ways. If I ask you to describe your relationship to your boss you would know what I mean. I would be asking how often you talk to each other and how personal your conversations are.*

*In any relationship there are expectations, usually unspecified. If I ask you what your expectations are of your boss and his of you, you would know what I mean. He or she probably expects you to show up for work, on time, work hard or at least smart, be loyal, be honest, work for the good of the company, among other things. You probably expect him or her to pay you, make your work environment as conducive to work as possible, appreciate your efforts, give you opportunity to grow, and appreciate that you have a life outside of your employment.*

*Do you have a relationship with God? How would you describe that relationship? What do you expect of God and what does he expect of you? Do you have an agreement with God? Anyone who says they believe in God must have some kind of agreement with that God. I grant you that most people probably haven't thought it through with any great clarity but they nonetheless live each day with some unarticulated understanding. But you are probably **not** among them. You have thought about God and your relationship to him. You probably have some understanding of what **his** part is and what **your** part is, in the grand scheme of life and eternity. So what is your relationship to God and agreement with God? What are your expectations of him and his expectations of you? Is your expectation that if you ask Jesus into your heart as your own personal savior that God will guarantee that you will go to heaven instead of hell when you die? The agreement is: God expects you to ask Jesus into your heart and you expect God to take you to heaven? Is your expectation*

*that if you live your life to best of your ability that God will see to it that you and your kids stay healthy and you will have the money you need to live comfortably? The agreement is: God expects you to be good and you expect God to be generous. What kind of deal do **you** have worked out with God?*

*Today in Genesis 17 we are going to see a man who understands what a relationship with God, an agreement with God, entails.*

### **Genesis 17:1-27**

*“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” <sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” <sup>9</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. <sup>13</sup> Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” <sup>15</sup> God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” <sup>17</sup> Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” <sup>19</sup> Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. <sup>20</sup> And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.” <sup>22</sup> When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. <sup>23</sup> On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. <sup>24</sup> Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, <sup>25</sup> and his son Ishmael was thirteen; <sup>26</sup> Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. <sup>27</sup> And every male in Abraham’s household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.”*

*Moses, the author of this book, shapes this chapter very artistically. I want you to see the literary structure of the text:*



*“Be blameless” This is not an impossible requirement. This is not a word that means Abram must be without sin or he will not meet the requirements of the agreement. This has to do not with absolute perfection but with direction – who is his master? It is a call for Abram to place himself under God’s exclusive supervision, guidance and protection. It has to do with total surrender to God without reservation or rival motive.*

**Now verse 2 indicates God’s commitment in the relationship:**

*God will confirm the covenant he made earlier with Abram and Abram will have a family in the generations to come that will be great in number.*

*Then quickly Moses moves to more fully explain this agreement, this covenant relationship God wishes to have with Abram and Abram’s posterity. In verses 3-16, the Covenant is spelled out. This is done in three parts:*

- 3-8 God’s part – “God said to him, ‘As for me...’”
- 9-14 Abram’s part – “Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for you...’”
- 15-16 Sarah’s part – “God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai..’”

*Part One: What does God say **he** will do? (verses 3-8)*

**1<sup>st</sup> God says he will give Abram many descendants.** *Nations and kings will come from Abram. So many that God said he would change Abram’s name to Abraham which means “father of multitudes.” Now remember this name is given to Abram when he is 99 years old and has a total of one child. Imagine Abram going to his wife and the others in his employ and announcing that from that day forward they are to call him “father of multitudes.”*

**But God’s part of the agreement was that, from Abraham, God would raise up many peoples/nations.** *There would come a day when multitudes, many nations, people too many to count, would be part of the family of Abraham.*

**What is God’s covenant promise to you?** *God said in Psalm 2:8 “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. In Revelation 2:26 God says, “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the*

nations..." In Revelation 5:9-10 we are told about Jesus, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and **they will reign on the earth.**" Just as God told Abraham that his descendants would be too many to count, so God has told us that a day is coming when we will stand before the throne of God "and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne..." Both in that day to come and in Abraham's day, the "family" will not be determined by natural birth but by new birth – not who was born of Abraham but who has been born of God. God covenant agreement is that that great family will be ours.

Is God keeping his promise? Today 1/3 of the world calls itself Christian. Even if you understand that many of them are Christian in name only, we are still left with the staggering fact that the true family of God today numbers hundreds of millions and the Scripture says that before the end there will be a great influx of believers into the family of God.

**2<sup>nd</sup> I want you to see another thing God says he will do in his part of the covenant-agreement – Verse 8** "The whole land of the Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you..." This is the most specific God had been up to this point about exactly what land Abraham's descendants would inherit. But please note that Abraham already knew that he and his family would not own that land in his lifetime. Abraham had been told that it would be 400 years before his descendants would get the land.

Genesis 15:13-16 "Know for certain that your descendants will be...enslaved and mistreated four hundred years...You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here."

But nonetheless, the covenant/agreement was made – God would give them the land.

**What is God's covenant promise to you about land?** *To us God has promised the whole earth – the new earth that is. The Scriptures teach so clearly that after Christ returns he will create a new universe and earth. Paul in Romans 8 said that is what we eagerly wait for – our new resurrected bodies living on the new earth. In both Revelation 5 and 22 we are told that we will reign with Christ on that new earth. The entire new world will be under the reign of Christ and we will reign with him. To us is promised an inheritance much more extensive than Canaan/Israel. Like Abraham, we may not see this come to pass in our lifetime on earth – but it will come to pass – God has promised – it is his covenant/agreement.*

*Now if God's covenant promise of a spiritual family too many to count and an inheritance of the new earth are not appealing to us, it probably means our appetites have been dulled. We don't long for those things because we have become satisfied with lesser things. Our eyes are filled with desire for things that will too soon be gone instead of those things that will last for eternity.*

**3<sup>rd</sup> there is one last, and most important, promise that God makes in his covenant agreement:** *In verses 7-8 he says it twice "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, **to be your God** and the God of your descendants after you... **and I will be their God.**" This seems to be the heart of the covenant. "I am the Lord your God" is a common refrain in Scriptures. Leviticus 26:12 "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people." The "I will" is like a marriage covenant. **It is a pledge of relationship.** The covenant is not just about what Abraham and his descendants will get. It is true the relationship has many benefits but the relationship far outweighs the other benefits. **This is not just follow God and get good things – but follow God and get God!!** Land and heirs had been promised before (and very importantly reiterated here) What is new here is **the relationship** God wishes to have with Abraham and his descendants. He would not be a God who was only out there, somewhere – but a God who would be with Abraham. Abraham was being called to a close personal relationship with God Almighty – which is the way God introduced himself to Abram in verse 1. This all-powerful God, maker of heaven and earth, was willing to walk with Abraham, always available to Abraham, working*

*ceaselessly on behalf of Abraham, and always in Abraham's every thought and action. It is what God meant in verse 1 when he said, "walk before me and be blameless." It is a daily spiritual intimacy with God.*

**What is God's covenant agreement with us?** *While the New Testament promises the benefits we have described already – the most amazing benefit is that of knowing God and being known by Him. Have not most of us already come to understand that all the possessions in the world are worthless if we have no relationships? Have we not come to understand that all the recognition in the world is without value if we have not experienced unconditional love? And have we not come to understand that only through a relationship with the eternal God can the other relationships, which we treasure, last beyond the grave? Everything comes down to knowing God – to having a relationship with God. That intimacy with God is available now but there is coming a day when it will be even better. When Jesus comes again and creates the new earth on which all God's people will live forever our relationship with God is described this way:*

*Revelation 21:3 "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

**What is God's covenant agreement? He promises a family, a homeland and a personal intimacy with himself.**

*Part One, in verses 3-8, deals with God's part of the Covenant but now in Part Two, what was Abraham's and our part?*

*Part Two: In verse 9, as we have already seen, God switches the focus from himself to Abraham.*

*Genesis 17:9 "Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.'"*

*What follows in our text is God's command for Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise every male who desired to be part of the covenant/agreement with God. Circumcision was then and still is a surgical procedure wherein the foreskin of the penis is removed. Now clearly this action was highly symbolical. Covenants, because they were so important, were usually inscribed on something considered permanent such as stone. Here God wants it inscribed in flesh – their own flesh - as a constant reminder of their commitment to the covenant to walk with God. Circumcision was performed on the male organ of reproduction probably because the covenant was about the procreation of descendants. The core issue here was not physical circumcision but what that circumcision stood for. It was an outward symbol of an inward commitment – a heart totally yielded to God. It involves not just the spiritual, the emotional, but all of life – life as it is lived each day. It symbolizes the irreversible nature of the commitment - what's done is done - there is no turning back.*

*Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that the issue was not a ritual performed but a heart that was changed.*

*Deuteronomy 30:6 "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*

*Romans 2:26 "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit, not by the written code.*

*God was calling Abraham to take his stand. Joshua, later, would say to the Israelites, "Choose, this day, who you will serve..." God is telling Abraham and everyone who would follow him that God is calling for a total life commitment.*

*Jesus says the same thing to us.*

*Luke 14:26-27 "If anyone comes to me and does not (by comparison to his love for me) hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*



*Matthew 10:38-39 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

*The Bible makes it clear that the old covenant with Abraham has been superceded by a new covenant. The old covenant is not broken but it is fulfilled in the new covenant. And circumcision is not the sign of the new covenant. What is? The Lord's Supper is expressly the sign of the new covenant: Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Under the old covenant, circumcision was the permanent reminder to the people of the covenant agreement they had with God. Jesus specifically said that the Lord's Supper was a reminder of the new covenant, "Do this in remembrance of me." But the substance of the issue was not in circumcision nor is it in the taking of the bread and wine – the substance is the covenant/agreement between God and us – a heart totally devoted to Jesus Christ.*

*Now step back into Abraham's experience for a minute. He is 99 years old. It has been 24 years since God came to him in the city of Haran and told him to go to a place God would show him. It has been 24 years since he was told that he would be the father of a great people. God has reiterated that promise on two occasions but nothing has actually happened. God came to him, here in chapter 17, asking him to take on a new name that means "father of multitudes" – a cruel joke if it isn't true. And then after 24 years of waiting and disappointment – God asks him to circumcise himself, his son Ishmael, and every male that works for him, as a sign of the agreement that God and Abraham are making.*

*Would you do it? Every element of God's promise is humanly impossible. Abraham even knows he won't personally inherit the land. He knows he and Sarah can't have children. He knows his own heart and how weak he is in following God. Would he believe God? What does Abraham do?*

*Genesis 17:23-24: "On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his*

*money, every male in his household, and circumcised them as God told him... Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day”*

*This passage teaches a very important lesson: **The evidence, the sign, of faith, of belief, is obedience!** Abraham’s circumcision was a sign of his response to the covenant. As Joshua would say it years later, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”*

*Men and women, God was calling Abraham and his descendants **and he is calling us to a faith**, a trust in God, which is **evidenced in whole-hearted obedience**. There is an illogical carelessness in American evangelicalism. It is possible that this carelessness, born out of a cheap grace, a deficient gospel, half-truths, was not evil in its intent but it has been pernicious in its results. It is still apparently widely thought that a person can know Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. It is still apparently widely assumed that faith in Christ is one thing and obedience to Christ is another. It is still apparently widely imagined that a relationship with God is largely a matter of some past experience of baptism, confirmation, or asking Jesus to come into one’s heart. Christianity, for too many, has been reduced to some past action rather than being a living relationship with total allegiance to God’s kingdom. For others Christianity has been reduced to a religious philosophy they claim as their own rather than a true change of one’s life- direction to follow the person, Jesus.*

*The same Jesus who said, John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will never perish but have eternal life” also said:*

*Mark 8:34-38 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

*God made a covenant with Abraham. God offered, not for his own good, but for Abraham's good, a set of promises that cover every aspect of life – a family, a homeland, and a relationship with almighty God. But Abraham had to respond – he had to believe – really believe – as evidenced by his obedience. I ask you, does your life give evidence to your acceptance of the covenant? Are you marked as belonging to Jesus Christ? Is your life given to knowing him, participating in the expansion of his family, and looking forward to that day when you reign with him on the new earth? Is there a circumcision of your heart that signals to all that you belong solely to God and live for him?*