



# Established

*God graciously chooses to make a covenant with His people.*

## **GENESIS 17:1-10,15-19**

Wedding ceremonies typically include the making of vows. A couple declares their commitment to each other by saying, “I do.” God established marriage as a covenant. It is a formal agreement of commitment before God of a man and woman to one another until one of them dies. God’s commitment to His people is also in the form of a covenant. Because God is eternal and faithful, His covenant with believers is everlasting. This truth is highlighted in God’s covenant with Abraham.

What does God making covenants with His people reveal about Him?

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## GENESIS 17:1–18:15

In Genesis 12, God began laying the foundation for what would be the Abrahamic covenant. In Genesis 17, He changed Abram’s name to Abraham and established this covenant with him. In the Old Testament, a covenant is the establishment of a bond between two parties both legally and relationally. The agreement to establish a covenant may involve responsibilities required by both parties for the covenant to stand (often called a bilateral covenant). The covenant of marriage is an example of this.

In other cases, the initiation and fulfillment of the covenant expectations may fall primarily on only one of the participants (often called a unilateral covenant). The Abrahamic covenant was a unilateral covenant. God initiated the covenant. He made promises to Abraham: to give him a land (Gen. 12:7; 13:17; 15:7-16), to make him into a great nation (18:18; 46:3), to bless him, to make him a man of renown, to bless those who blessed him, and to curse those who mistreated him (12:2-3). God pledged Himself to fulfilling His covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants, as was demonstrated in the ceremony in 15:9-21. God’s purpose for blessing Abraham was not only for Abraham’s sake but to bless people from every nation through him (12:1-3). Finally, God promised that this covenant would be an everlasting covenant (17:1-13).

The Abrahamic covenant was a unilateral covenant because God initiated it and committed Himself alone to fulfilling it, while at the same time God expected Abraham’s obedience within the confines of its terms. The Abrahamic covenant is similar to the new covenant believers have in Christ. God initiated it and He alone fulfills it. Believers make no contribution to their salvation—it is by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Nevertheless, just as God expected Abraham to obey Him, believers have been created anew in Christ for good works (Eph. 2:10). What’s more, the new covenant also is an everlasting covenant. The one who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ “will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

 **Read Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19. What do these verses communicate about God’s plans for His people?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## COVENANT (GEN. 17:1-8)

<sup>1</sup> When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him, saying, “I am God Almighty. Live in my presence and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> I will set up my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you greatly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: <sup>4</sup> “As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And to you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing — all the land of Canaan — as a permanent possession, and I will be their God.”

### VERSES 1-2

Abram came into the land when he was seventy-five years old (Gen. 12:4), and the events in this passage happened when he was **ninety-nine years old**. Thus, this appearance of the Lord happened twenty-four years after Abram first received the promises of God. Also, his son Ishmael would have been thirteen years old (16:16). It was at this time that the Lord appeared to Abram just as He had done twenty-four years prior (12:7).

When the Lord **appeared** to Abram, He identified Himself as *El Shaddai*, **God Almighty**. This name of God refers to His majesty and omnipotent power to perform all He has promised to do for His people (see also 28:3; 35:11). Based on the promises God previously made to Abram—and His ability to bring them to pass—God instructed Abram to **live in my presence**. This means Abram was to always acknowledge God in faithful obedience, recognizing God was with him wherever he would go. To be **blameless** means God expected Abram to be wholeheartedly devoted to Him. These are the proper responses of one with whom God has entered into a covenant relationship. God’s calling upon one’s life comes with responsibilities to Him.

In verse 2, God promised to establish or set up the covenant He began in Genesis 12 and made with Abram in Genesis 15. God expressed His covenant with Abram in stages, just as He would fulfill it in stages. This was a reaffirmation of what God had already told Abram.

Once again God stated that, even though he and his wife did not have a child, the covenant would result in God's multiplying Abram greatly. God was reiterating that He would make Abram's descendants multiply so much that it would be impossible to count them, just as it is impossible to count the dust on the earth (13:16) or the stars in the sky (15:5). This is a major theme in the following verses.

### VERSE 3

Falling **facedown** was an intentional act of Abram. He did not stumble and fall but instead threw himself down to the ground to demonstrate his reverence and gratitude to God, demonstrating his humility before God and his willingness to obey him. Before, when the Lord promised to multiply Abram, Abram questioned God (15:2) and both he and Sarai sought to take matters into their own hands, but now Abram appears to have been maturing in his faith even though he will continue to struggle with it (17:17). Abram learned that his merciful and gracious God does not withdraw His promises because of human failure. As Abram was in this humble posture before God, God spoke to him.

***When God Almighty makes His covenant with you,  
you can be sure He will keep it.***

### VERSES 4-5

God emphatically stated, ***my covenant is with you***. The emphasis is on *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. If these promises came from anyone else, there would be reason to doubt them. But when God Almighty makes His covenant with you, you can be sure He will keep it along with all of the promises inherent to it. God communicated that He alone has the authority and ability to do these things. This beginning statement also emphasizes the personal relationship God was establishing with Abram in this covenant, much like the pledge between two people who enter into the covenant of marriage.

At this point, God began with the first of four promises He pledged to Abram. Earlier, He had promised Abram would be the father of "a great nation" (12:2). Here, God promised Abram would become the ***father of many nations***. The remainder of Genesis attests to the fulfillment of this promise, with the emergence of the Midianites (25:2), the Ishmaelites (25:12), the Edomites (36:31), and of course the Israelites. The apostle Paul wrote that the fulfillment of this promise to Abram

refers to every believer from all of the nations who comes to saving faith in Christ (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:6-9). In Galatians 3:29, addressing Gentiles, Paul concluded, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.”

Since God promised Abram would be the *father of many nations*, God changed Abram’s name to **Abraham**. In Hebrew, Abram means “exalted father,” but *Abraham* means “father of multitude.” God indicated He was changing Abram’s name to Abraham because literally, “I have made you a father of many nations.” God expressed His future promise in the past tense to communicate that what He was going to do was as good as done.

### **KEY DOCTRINE:** *God the Father*

God is Father in truth to those who become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. (See Romans 4:13-17; Galatians 3:28-29.)

### **VERSE 6**

The second promise God made is that He would make Abraham extremely fruitful. This was God’s command to Adam (1:22,28), and He repeated the command to Noah (9:1,7). But here, God did not command Abraham to be fruitful. Instead, He promised to Abraham, ***I will make you extremely fruitful.*** What’s more, God reemphasized that Abraham would be the father of many nations by telling Abraham that He ***will make nations and kings come from you.*** The kings of future Israel and of the other nations that came from Abraham attests to the fulfillment of this promise. Nevertheless, the ultimate realization of this promise was fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1).

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### **VERSES 7-8**

The third promise God made is that He would ***confirm*** this covenant as an everlasting covenant to be Abraham’s God and the God of his

offspring. Again, just as everyone who belongs to Christ is Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:29), every person who has or ever will place his or her faith in Christ becomes the fulfillment of this promise unto eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 6:23).

The final promise God made to Abraham is that God would give him and his offspring the land of Canaan as a permanent possession. This was important for Moses's audience as God instructed them to conquer and take the land of Canaan because it was their inheritance from God based upon the promise to Abraham.

 **How does God's covenant with Abraham impact followers of Jesus?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Look for organizational markers to aid in Scripture study.*

Genesis 17 is an example of how words and phrases in a passage are often repeated. Such repetition is helpful in organizing a passage in such a way that enhances our understanding. For example, "as for me" (v. 4), "as for you" (v. 9), "as for your wife Sarai" (v. 15), and "as for Ishmael" (v. 20). These phrases form a way to track what God was planning for each person. Track the uses of the phrase "I will" in Genesis 17:1-8. Make a list of all the things that God promised to do using this phrase.

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**SIGN** (GEN. 17:9-10)

**<sup>9</sup> God also said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep my covenant. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised."**

## VERSES 9-10

God laid out Abraham's responsibilities in light of His promises. The emphasis in the prior verses was on God and what He pledged to do for Abraham and his offspring. Now, the words **you** and **your** turned God's focus to Abraham and his offspring. God made His expectation of them clear. Abraham and all future generations that come from him are to respond rightly to God's covenant by faithfully keeping it.

As was common with covenants, a sign was to be given as a reminder of it, like the rainbow with the covenant God made after the flood with Noah. Here, God commanded that the sign of His covenant with Abraham and his male offspring be circumcision. This was a reminder of the covenant God made with them and the expectation that they were to remain faithful to it. It was a permanent mark that could not be undone, pointing to the permanency of God's covenant. Long before Moses gave the law, God made this covenant with Abraham, and circumcision was to be a physical reminder to future generations of what God had done.

- How does the baptism of a follower of Jesus serve as a sign of agreement with the new covenant?
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## PROMISE (GEN. 17:15-19)

<sup>15</sup> God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai, for Sarah will be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” <sup>17</sup> Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Can Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman, give birth?” <sup>18</sup> So Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael were acceptable to you!” <sup>19</sup> But God said, “No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm my covenant with him as a permanent covenant for his future offspring.”

## VERSES 15-16

God changed Sarai's name to **Sarah**. Both are derivatives of the word meaning “princess,” but now instead of producing a great nation (12:2), she would be producing **nations** and the **kings** of nations. The Edomites, Amalekites, and people of Judah and Israel all came from her. There were

forty-one kings who reigned over Israel and Judah, not to mention the number of kings who reigned over Edom and Amalek. Calling her *Sarah* points to the greater, royal significance she would have. Sarah was an essential part of God’s plan, as He would bless her by opening up her barren womb and giving her the son she longed to have.

### VERSES 17-18

In verse 3, Abraham fell down before God in reverence and awe. He now fell down on his face incredulously laughing at the prospect of him and Sarah having a child together at their ages. It seems as if everything that God had promised him and Sarah finally struck him, and it was more than his mind could fathom. From a human perspective, Abraham’s response makes sense. As before, Abraham suggested that perhaps all of this could happen if God would choose to do it all through ●*Ishmael*.

***He is the One “who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).***

### VERSE 19

The first two words in verse 19 point to the difference between looking at oneself to accomplish what God has promised and looking to God to do it: **But God**—the One who identified Himself as *El Shaddai*, “God Almighty” (17:1)—He is the One “who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20). So, God repeated to Abraham that Sarah would have a son. Then He instructed Abraham to call the boy ●*Isaac*, which means “he laughs,” as a way of reminding Abraham of his laughter. What’s more, the Lord again confirmed His covenant with Abraham and his future offspring. This included Ishmael. Although Ishmael was not the promised seed, God promised that He would bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation (17:20). After the Lord withdrew from Abraham, he promptly obeyed God and circumcised himself and every other male in his household (17:21-27).

○ Why might our human limits get in the way of accepting God’s plan and promises?

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers should recognize God's grace in His dealings with them.
- + Believers are to demonstrate their faith in Jesus.
- + Believers should trust God to accomplish what only He can accomplish.

**○ As a group, discuss ways God is demonstrating His faithfulness in your lives. How can your Bible study group facilitate believers' living in recognition of God's grace in their lives?**

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**○ If you trusted God to accomplish in you what only He can accomplish, what would that kind of trust look like?  
What gets in the way of you more fully trusting God?**

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**○ Memorize Genesis 17:7.**

## *Prayer Needs*

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