

GENESIS 17

Introduction

The current and future history of the world and its nations involves this covenant God made in Genesis four thousand years ago with Abraham. God's covenant with Abraham begins in Genesis 12:1-3 and is confirmed and enlarged to him in Genesis 13:14-17; 15:1-7; and 17:1-18. The most notable features of God's covenant with Abraham are these:

^ Abraham is promised that he would be the father of a great nation; in Genesis 12:2 God says, "I will make you a great nation..."

%o The nation that descends from him is promised the permanent physical possession of the land of Canaan; in Genesis 17:8 God says, "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession..."

^ All the other nations of the world are to be blessed by this nation; in Genesis 12:3 God says, "I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The nation that descended from Abraham is Israel...The land is the land of Canaan in the Middle East...The blessing of all the nations by Israel refers to a future time on earth when Jesus Christ will return to rule from His throne in Jerusalem. History and prophecy are the unfolding drama of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham to preserve, convert, and restore Israel before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

In Genesis Seventeen we'll see:

#1 As For God, He Will Eventually
Keep His Everlasting Covenant

#2 As For Abraham, He Earnestly
Kept God's Everlasting Covenant

#3 As For You, Keep On Expecting
God's Everlasting Covenant

#1 As For God, He Will Eventually
Keep His Everlasting Covenant
(v1-8)

History is not too exciting a subject for most of us. Yet here we are discussing, not only history, but ancient Middle Eastern history! And we're excited about it. That's because the nation of Israel is the key to understanding all of Bible prophecy - and this

Abrahamic Covenant, as theologians call it, is the key to understanding God's dealings with Israel.

In Chapter Fifteen you learn that God's covenant with Abraham is unconditional; nothing he or his descendants do or don't do can alter it. God's covenant with Abraham is also literal; it is about the real, physical descendants of Abraham and the real, physical possession of the land of Canaan. God gives the borders of the land in real terms: Genesis 15:18 says, "On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates..." It is not a spiritual allegory about the believer possessing the blessings of heaven.

Now, in Chapter Seventeen, you learn something else about this covenant. In four verses - 7, 8, 13, & 19 - God says it is everlasting. This means that, while Israel did enjoy a glorious time under King David and King Solomon, the Abrahamic Covenant cannot be said to have been already fulfilled in history. Israel's presence in and possession of the land are said to be everlasting - to go on eternally.

God appears to Abraham and makes him these wonderful promises, beginning in verse one.

Genesis 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.

You do not encounter God the way Abraham did. God normally reveals Himself to you in and through His word. But you are at no disadvantage! Abraham's experience, while marvelous, contains certain elements that can and should be true of your own experience of God in and through His word:

{ God is personally revealed to you.

In His word to Abraham, God knows his need and reveals Himself in a fresh way, with a new name. When you tell someone your name, your telling them something intimate and personal. The same can be true of your own discovery of God in and through His word! He is constantly seeking to reveal His many names to your heart...

{ God promises to preserve you.

God tells Abraham He is "Almighty God" and encourages him to "walk." Almighty God is El Shaddai; it is a tender word, meaning "the many breasted One." Used of God it means He is able to sustain, nourish, comfort, and protect you - like a mother with her child at her breast. Everything needed to walk with God is provided by His grace and love.

{ Abraham is called upon to persevere.

"Walk" also speaks of responsibility to progress, to press on. Your experience with God in and through His word encourages you to persevere.

{ Abraham is exhorted to personal purity of life.

"Walk before Me and be blameless". As with Abraham, you are called to submission and obedience in order to fully enjoy the blessings God has for you.

Genesis 17:2 "And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

Genesis 17:3 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying:

Genesis 17:4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.

Genesis 17:5 "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.

Genesis 17:6 "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

Many commentators believe that Abram means "father of many" and that Abraham means "father of a multitude." As "father of many," Abram had *no* offspring until age 86, when Ishmael was born. He was then renamed "father of a multitude." If you look only at the facts, you have to conclude that God has a problem with mathematics!

In your own life it often seems that God has a problem. It can be with mathematics, or with finances, or with keeping track of the time. Look beyond the facts by faith.

Genesis 17:7 "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.

Genesis 17:8 "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

Two important everlasting promises are made in verses seven and eight: an "everlasting" people who have "everlasting possession" of the land.

^ The "everlasting people" are the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews. History verifies God's promise to Abraham: Despite centuries of Satanically inspired efforts to exterminate them, God has miraculously preserved the Jews. You cannot really even begin to understand how they still exist as an identifiable ethnic group apart from God's covenant with Abraham to preserve them.

%o "Everlasting possession" of the land requires the future prominence of Israel as a nation to which Jesus Christ will return. From this you would expect God to bring scattered Israel back to Canaan in the Last Days before Jesus returns. You have seen Him do so in this century!

God's covenant with Abraham is unconditional, literal, and everlasting. He will keep it. He is setting the stage to do so right before your very eyes!

#2 As For Abraham, He Earnestly
Kept God's Everlasting Covenant
(v9-27)

In the first eight verses, God says "As for Me, I will..." Beginning with verse nine, God says, "As for you, you shall..." His covenant was unconditional. Disobedience by Abraham or his descendants could not void it. The enjoyment of its benefits, however, required obedience. There was something Abraham and his descendants were to observe as a means of enjoying the blessings of the covenant. It was circumcision.

Genesis 17:9 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Genesis 17:10 "This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;

Genesis 17:11 "and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Genesis 17:12 "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.

Genesis 17:13 "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:14 "And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

Circumcision is the cutting away of the forekin of the male reproductive organ. It was not unique to Abraham; many of the people contemporary to him practiced circumcision. God took the common practice and invested it with a new significance.

On a much lesser scale, God wants to take your common practices and give them new significance!

There are several important questions we must struggle with regarding circumcision:

{ What is the place of circumcision today in your life as a believer?
If you let Scripture decide, here's what the word says:

1 Corinthians 7:19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*.

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Galatians 6:15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

Physical circumcision is no longer an issue in your relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

{ If this Abrahamic Covenant is indeed unconditional, literal, and everlasting, and if circumcision is set aside today by the work of Jesus, then why does God say, in verse thirteen, "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant"? This is an important question: If it can be shown that "everlasting" can be spiritually interpreted with regard to circumcision, then perhaps we are wrong about the rest of the Abrahamic Covenant being literal as well.

I came across an interesting portion of Scripture that sheds some light on this. In Ezekiel 44:4-9 you read,

"Also He brought me by way of the north gate to the front of the temple; so I looked, and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD; and I fell on my face. And the LORD said to me, "Son of man, mark well, see with your eyes and hear with your ears, all that I say to you concerning all the ordinances of the house of the LORD and all its laws. Mark well who may enter the house and all who go out from the sanctuary. Now say to the rebellious, to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: O house of Israel, let us have no more of all your abominations. When you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to defile it; My house; and when you offered My food, the fat and the blood, then they broke My covenant because of all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of My holy things, but you have set *others* to keep charge of My sanctuary for you. Thus says the Lord GOD: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who *is* among the children of Israel."

Beginning in Chapter Forty, Ezekiel describes a future Temple. There are three interpretations of this held among Bible scholars:

1 - Ezekiel was predicting the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple after the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon.

2 - Ezekiel was prophesying about the Church in a figurative sense; he did not have a literal Temple in mind.

3 - A still future literal Temple will be built and utilized for worship during the future reign of Jesus after His return.

Which view is correct?

^ The first view must be eliminated because it suggests that Ezekiel was mistaken when he wrote. When the Jews returned from Babel, they did not follow Ezekiel's plan for the Temple.

% The second view is inconsistent with the normal rules of Bible interpretation. Those who hold this view interpret Ezekiel's earlier, now fulfilled prophecies as being literal, yet interpret his yet unfulfilled prophecies symbolically.

^ Ezekiel *is* describing worship in the future Temple that will be rebuilt when Jesus Christ returns to earth! And, while we don't fully understand its significance, Ezekiel says that "No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who *is* among the children of Israel." It appears that circumcision will be reinstated after Jesus sets up His kingdom.

Genesis 17:15 Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name.

Genesis 17:16 "And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of* nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."

Sarai has her name changed to Sarah. James Montgomery Boice suggests that what is added to both their names is the sound of a breath. In ancient languages the words for "breathe" and "spirit" were the same. A breath was associated with God's Spirit! God adds the power of His Spirit to their names to accomplish the impossible!

Genesis 17:17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall *a child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?"

Some say Abraham's laugh is from doubt; some say it is from joy. Sometimes, when you look at yourself, you just have to laugh! It seems almost comical that God chooses to use and bless you...And it brings you great joy when you realize He does despite who you are!

Genesis 17:18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

Genesis 17:19 Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him.

Abraham was a believer when he schemed to conceive Ishmael. Ishmael was conceived prior to the cutting away of Abraham's flesh. Isaac would be conceived after the flesh had been removed. This is an important devotional insight. It is possible for you as a believer to produce works by your flesh that you desire God to bless. God wants you to look past the natural, carnal methods and enjoy His supernatural blessings instead.

Genesis 17:20 "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Genesis 17:21 "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

Abraham cared deeply for Ishmael. He learned that God cared even more for the boy! As you pray for your children, you will be brought to an understanding of God's greater love for them *and* of His plan for their lives.

Genesis 17:22 Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

Genesis 17:23 So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him.

Genesis 17:24 Abraham *was* ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Genesis 17:25 And Ishmael his son *was* thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Genesis 17:26 That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael;

Genesis 17:27 and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Abraham earnestly kept God's everlasting covenant. Think about it for a moment. It must have seemed strange to those in his household. The father of many, who had only one son, wanted to be called the father of a multitude. His wife, who had no sons of her own, was to be regarded as "Sarah" - a mother of princes. And at least 318 male servants and their male children were to undergo delicate surgery with crude implements on their reproductive organs!

The things that God has asked *me* to do in faith, trusting His word, are not even in the same category! The Apostle Paul makes this commentary about Abraham in Romans 4:19-21,

"And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform."

I don't always have faith like that; but I have a God like that! Your God is the God of Abraham and He works to bring forth faith like Abraham's. He brings life out of death, love out of hate, peace out of turmoil, joy out of misery, praise out of cursing, and strength to those who trust Him.

#3 As For You, Keep Expecting God's Everlasting Covenant

Don't confuse the nation of Israel with the Church. God will eventually keep His unconditional, literal, everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The Apostle Paul says,

Romans 11:25-27 "For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this *is* My covenant with them, When I take away their sins."

God has preserved Israel; He will convert and restore Israel according to His covenant. God is not through with Israel.

The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah in His first coming. The establishment of the Kingdom that would and will fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant was therefore postponed to a yet future time when Jesus will return again. In the mean time Jesus has established a new spiritual "nation," His Church, composed of all those from every literal nation, tribe, and language who receive salvation by grace through faith in Him. The Church Age will continue until Jesus returns to Rapture us to heaven. Then, while we are in heaven, God will again turn His full attention on fulfilling His covenant with Abraham. A seven year period known as the Great Tribulation will come upon the earth, at the end of which "all Israel will be saved." Jesus will return, establish the promised and prophesied Kingdom, and God's unconditional, literal, everlasting covenant with Abraham will be fulfilled - - Israel will be converted, permanently possess the land promised her, and be a blessing to all the nations of the world.

Conclusion

Bible prophecy should be a prominent area of study for you. How should you go about it? Let's look at Daniel's study of prophecy for encouragement and as an example.

Daniel 9:1 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of the lineage of the Medes, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans;

Daniel 9:2 in the first year of his reign I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years *specified* by the word of the LORD through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

We don't know how much of a Bible Daniel had with him, but we are told that he gave intense study to the prophetic portions of Jeremiah.

After sixty-seven years of captivity, you'd think that Daniel might be more interested in other, more "practical," verses. Daniel understood that prophecy determines practice!

Daniel's encouragement to you - -

His study of prophecy brought him hope, discipline, devotion, and it inspired his faithful service to both God and country. It does the same for you!

Daniel's example to you - -

He took prophecy *literally*, not figuratively or symbolically. He determined that the captivity of Israel was almost over! "Seventy years" meant "seventy years" to him; it wasn't a spiritual picture or an illustration. *When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.* The Bible does use figurative, symbolic language. When it does it either tells you or you can determine it from the context.

You are living in the Last Days:

^ You have seen the regathering of the Jews to the land of Canaan.

%o You are witnessing the reunification of Europe, an important prophecy of Daniel's regarding the Last Days.

^ You live in the only time in human history that the technology has existed to unite the world into a single economic system involving a "mark" of some kind on the hand or forehead.

%o Other things, such as the rise of Satanism, occultism, the love of self with its emphasis on self-esteem, the worship of man as a god, the talk of a New World Order by most of the world's secular and religious leaders - - all indicate that Jesus Christ's Second Coming is soon.

Be like Daniel. Study prophecy, and study it literally. Look to the Middle East as God sets the stage to fulfill His covenant with Abraham.

More importantly, look to Jesus!