

The Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 17:1-14

Genesis 17:1-14 - *“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. ² And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 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. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 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. 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.”*

⁹ And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 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; 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. 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. 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. 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.”

Background Notes

By the beginning of Genesis 17, thirteen years had passed since the birth of Ishmael. All during those years there is no record in Scripture of God communicating with Abraham. Maybe this was part of God's discipline of Abram and Sarai, for using Hagar in the way they did.

In chapter 17 the Lord appeared to Abram once again, when he was 99 years old. God confirmed His covenant with Abram, as well as the covenant promises He had made with Abram. And God changed Abram's name "Abraham." The name Abram means "exalted father," and Abraham means "father of a multitude."

Can you imagine Abraham telling his servants that now he is to be called "father of a multitude." That took a lot of faith! In fact, there may have been some laughs among the servants when Abraham related this name change! But God was

specific in His reason for the name change. *“I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you”* (v6). Both “nations” and “kings” are **plural**, so God was quite specific in the way He changed Abraham’s name.

God formally established the Abrahamic covenant by instituting circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Notice that the baby boys were to be circumcised when they were eight days old (v12). With today’s medical knowledge, we know that at eight days the vitamin needed for the optimum clotting of blood reaches its peak in the body of the newborn.

Why was circumcision used as a sign for the Abrahamic covenant? There are several reasons. First and foremost, the Abrahamic covenant had to do with the “promised seed” and descendants of Abraham. I think that you can see the obvious association between circumcision and the means of having children. Furthermore, this sign would visibly confront and remind any Jewish male and female who were about to depart from God’s clearly defined sexual boundaries.

And then of course, circumcision was a “cutting rite,” or a “cutting ceremony.” The implication was that if a Jewish male child was not circumcised, then he was to be “cut off” from the covenant community. *“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”* (v14). Cut off from his people! In some cases, it meant the individual was put out of the covenant community, and sometimes it actually meant death.

Doctrinal Points

1. God can and will keep His covenant with believers.

Notice the number of times that God said “I will” in verse 1-8. “I will make my covenant between Me and you. I will multiply you exceedingly” (v2). “I will make you a father of many nations” (v5). “I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make nations of you and kings shall come from you” (v6). “I will establish my covenant between Me and you, and your descendants after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant” (v7). “I will give to you and your descendants the land, and I will be their God” (v8). **God will keep His covenant!**

Notice, too, that the Lord calls it “**My**” covenant - not “our” covenant. God planned and designed and initiated the covenant. It is **His** covenant, and He will keep His covenant.

God then revealed Himself to Abraham by the name “El Shaddai.” *“I am Almighty God”* (v1). This is the first time the name El Shaddai is used in the Bible. The idea in “El Shaddai” or “God Almighty” is not just raw power and supreme power, but majestic might! In many contexts where El Shaddai is used (as here), it refers to God’s majestic might - and His ability to keep His promises. God is “El Shaddai,” “God Almighty,” the all-sufficient God - because He is able to keep His promises! God can and will keep His covenant with believers.

Just as God can and will keep the Abrahamic covenant, so He can and will keep His covenant with Christians. He has promised (or covenanted with) us, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5). Do you believe that promise? If you are a Christian, remember that God can and will keep this promise. It’s a covenant! There may be broken fellowship if you sin, and God may have to discipline you, but He will **never** leave you or forsake you! God can and will keep His covenant with believers.

2. Believers are obligated to walk in line with God’s covenant.

Notice that the Abrahamic covenant was an **unconditional** and an **everlasting** covenant. *“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant....”* (v7). An everlasting covenant cannot be broken. Even though the Abrahamic covenant was an unconditional covenant made by God, Abraham and his descendants were obligated to keep it. Verse 9: *“And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.”*

Keeping the covenant did not just involve practicing circumcision, the sign of the covenant. It involved walking before God in line with the covenant. Verse 1: *“I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.”* Just as Abraham and his descendants were obligated to walk in line with God’s covenant, so believers today are expected to walk in line with God’s covenant. God has covenanted to save us and keep us secure, but we are obligated to walk a holy life in line with our covenant relationship with God. Not in order to keep our salvation - no, that is eternally secure - but out of love and gratitude for our Lord.

1 Peter 1:15-16 says *“as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”* God did not call us on the basis of our holiness, or by how many good deeds we had done. No - we were sinners! But now that we are called and saved from our sin, we are obligated to walk in line with that holy calling - *“as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”* Believers are obligated to walk in line with God’s covenant.

We know that it’s impossible for us to live 100% sinless and holy lives before we get to Heaven. 1 John 1:8 says: *“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* We still have the sinful nature, and we’ll have it until we get our resurrected bodies when we get to Heaven. So we do sin - and yet 1 John 2:1 says: *“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.”*

The point here is that believers are obligated, with the Lord’s help, to strive to lead holy lives as much as possible. God doesn’t tell us to be 95% holy, or even 99% holy. The **ideal** is stated: **“Be holy, for I am holy.”** Believers are obligated to walk in line with God’s covenant.

Practical Application

Why not try the best formula for living?

What is the best formula for living? Is it to get everything out of life that you can? Or get all that is coming to you? Or what about, “You only go around once!” or “Do your own thing!” These are all formulas for living, but they are the **world’s** formulas for living.

Why not try the **best** formula for living? The formula is right here in Genesis 17:1: *“I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.”* It really doesn’t get any better than that!

Because God created us, He knows all about us. He knows what is best for us, and He knows what is not good for us. Here’s an illustration: Trains were designed to run on tracks - but suppose a train decides that it wants more freedom to do its own thing, so it leaves the tracks to have more fun in the countryside. I’m so sorry! That train just lost **all** its freedom by leaving the track. That’s where its freedom is - on the track!

Do you see the point for us? In the same way, “doing your own thing” does not bring us freedom. God has designed us for Himself, to run on **His** track – the track that He has especially laid out for each one of us.

Walk before God and be blameless. That’s the **best** formula for living!