

God's Specific Promise that Sarah Would Bear a Son

Genesis 17:15-27

Genesis 17:15-17 - *Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 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." 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?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" 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. 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. ²¹ But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."*

²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. 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. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Background Notes

In Genesis 17:5 God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and in verse 15 God changed Sarai's name to Sarah. The names "Sarai" and "Sarah" basically mean the same: "princess." So why the name change? There are various views, but I think the name change stressed to Sarah that God was telling her that she really was a princess, with "royal blood"! She was to be a mother of nations, and kings would come from her!

Verses 23-27 record the circumcision of Abraham and his household. Remember, circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. Although circumcision was a physical operation, it had a spiritual parallel in the idea of "circumcision of the heart" - spiritual circumcision, or obedience. Deuteronomy 30:6: *"And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."*

That's the point that Paul was making when he spoke about circumcision in Romans 2:28-29: *"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹ but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God."*

From God's perspective, circumcision was a physical operation and sign of the Abrahamic covenant, but it always had the idea associated with it of spiritual circumcision of the heart - that is, obedience to God.

One important point about Abraham's circumcision: his circumcision did not save him! **Abraham was saved by faith, not by circumcision!** Paul made that point in Romans 4:9-11: *"Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith that he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, so righteousness might be imputed to them also."*

Circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham's salvation! His circumcision came a number of years after Scripture says that "Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15). I want to emphasize this point because salvation is the same today. We are saved by faith! Not by baptism! Not by good works! Not by going to church! The means of salvation is by **faith** in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Doctrinal Points

1. With God, all things are possible.

That point comes right from a verse of Scripture: *"With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible"* (Mark 10:27). That truth is illustrated here in Genesis 17: Sarah would bear a son when she was 90 years old. But that's impossible! Yes, naturally speaking - but not for God! With God, all things are possible!

Abraham certainly had a hard time believing this: *"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?'"*(v17). Was this a laugh of doubt, or a laugh of joy? Verse 18 seems to indicate it was a laugh of doubt. Verse 18: *"Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"* In other words: "Lord, I was planning on the promise being fulfilled through Ishmael! Isn't that your plan?" But the context does not seem to indicate a lot of doubt, and Abraham was not rebuked. Romans 4:19-21 says: *"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."*

So that would indicate that it was not a laugh of doubt. I think that Abraham's laugh was a "this is too good to be true" laugh! Is it possible that Sarah and I will have a child of our own? In any case, God can do what seems naturally impossible. With God, all things are possible.

Here's a personal illustration. Did you know that "Talks for Growing Christians" is now broadcast on short wave radio, and accessed worldwide via the internet? If the Lord had told me a few years ago that I would preach and teach to people around the world, I think that I would have laughed like Abraham. "Lord, that's too good to be true! How could that be possible? I'm just a small time teacher! I'm not known worldwide." But God can do what looks naturally impossible. Remember - with man, it is impossible, but not with God. With God, **all things** are possible!

2. The Abrahamic covenant was made with Israel, but its blessings are not limited to Israel.

From the New Testament we know that all believers are blessed as the spiritual descendants of Abraham. But under this doctrinal point, we are particularly considering people of Arabic descent. When Abraham wanted to know about Ishmael, the Lord said, *"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"* (v20). In Genesis 25 we'll see how God fulfilled this specific promise of twelve princes from Ishmael.

Now notice verse 21: *"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."* There would be blessing for Ishmael and his descendants – the Arabic peoples. But the Abrahamic covenant was made with Abraham and his descendants through **Isaac** - through the Jewish people. As part of the covenant God said: *"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"* (v8).

So "The Land" belongs by divine right to the Jewish people. This wouldn't justify the secular state of Israel attempting to use unbiblical means to gain land. In His time, God will give all the land that was promised under the Abrahamic covenant back to the Jewish people.

But there's another side of the coin! That doesn't mean that there is no blessing for anyone else in the Middle East. The key to blessing in the Middle East is for people to turn to the Lord, recognize that the Jews are God's chosen people, and understand that God has future plans for Israel. Blessing will come by recognizing this truth. Isaiah 19:24-25 says, *"In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."* The Abrahamic covenant was made with Israel, but its blessings are not limited to Israel.

Practical Application

Don't delay to obey!

Verse 26 says that Abraham was circumcised on the very same day that God revealed it as the sign of the covenant. Abraham didn't waste any time, even though circumcision is not without pain. Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised. Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised. That is why many Arabs, even to this day, circumcise their boys at age 13. But the point here is that Abraham didn't delay. He obeyed the Lord immediately - and we should not delay to obey either.

The obvious application here would be in regard to salvation. 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, "*Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*" If you are not a Christian, don't delay to obey the Lord and come to Him for salvation. Life is short, and life can come to an end suddenly and without warning.

But there's an application here for Christians, too. Don't delay to obey in what the Lord asks us to do as believers! Do you delay in necessary discipline in the home, or in the church? What about faithfully giving to the Lord? Do you delay in your giving? Don't delay to obey!

This past summer I had the privilege of baptizing three of our Holy Land tour members in the Sea of Galilee. All three of them realized that they had delayed in obeying the Lord by not taking the step of baptism.

Have you delayed in obeying the Lord in **any** area of your life as a believer? Don't delay to obey!