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LESSON NOTES (EXPLORE THE BIBLE)

GENESIS — A NEW NAME FOR THE NEW COVENANT

Lord's Day, November 1, 2015

Teaching and Study Preparation

OVERVIEW

Preparation for Session "9" Genesis 17

Human beings rarely deploy "covenants" in their social interactions. Rather, we are prone to initiate, negotiate, fulfill, and break, contracts. Contracts allow parties to be released from their constraints if one of the parties cannot, or will not fulfill their "part of the bargain."

For example, when modern humans sense and then "prove" their spouse is adulterous, most feel they have the right to break the marriage "contract." When modern humans go under financially, most feel they owe nothing if they have declared bankruptcy through established channels. And, when modern humans find out they will not be paid for the product or service they have provided or will provide, they have no compulsion to deny the service or retain/rescue the unpaid product.



God does not make contracts. When He covenanted with Abraham that great nations would come from him and his descendants, He did not say "I *will* make you a father of many nations." What He did say (Genesis 17:5) was—"I have made you a father of many nations." The Lord God Jehovah does not need to "promise." His declarations are just that, declarations, not promises. When we have to say we "promise," it communicates quite clearly that what we say is not always what happens. So we use the idea of "promise" to suggest we'll try extra hard, or in many instances, we'll *really* do what we say we're going to do. God does not "promise." He does. If our soteriological security were based on a contract, its fulfillment would be null and void. No attorneys would be needed.

We sometimes laugh at God under our breath, just like Abraham and Sarah. Hopefully, we'll never be called "he laughs." (Imagine the 3rd grade playground with "he laughs" always being the last to be picked for the team.) Like Sarah & Abraham, we smirk within our minds about when our pain will be over. When we will ever get that job. When will our child ever come back to the Lord God. But He knows, even the smirks within our minds. He knows.

KEY TEXT ISSUES: GENESIS 17

Genesis 17:1-8. *Yahweh declares Abram to be Abraham.* When the exalted father of Ishmael, the root of a great nation,¹ was 99 years old, the Lord God Jehovah appeared to Abram and declared:

I am El Shaddai. As the Almighty God you shall be with Me, and be blameless. My covenant with you will become self-evident as your numbers and the numbers of your descendants increase greatly.

Abram was blown away. He fell face down and God then said:

Here is My declaration—You will be the father of many nations. Thus, you'll no longer be called "exalted father;" you'll now be called "father of many" because I have made you a father of many nations.

Here's how it's going to happen—I will make you fruitful. Many nations will see you as their ancestor—even kings will name you as their ancestor. This declaration between Me and you, and your descendants for generations to come—I will be your God and the God of your descendants! Furthermore, the whole land of Canaan, where you're now an alien stranger: I will give it as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants. I will be their God!

- Q What does it mean to promise someone something? And, what does it mean when a parent says to a child, "I promise..." to go to Disney, to be home by 5:00 for the baseball game, or to pay for your college education?
- Q To what extent then, does the Lord God "promise?" Did He make a promise to Abram to make him a "father of many nations?" [Hint: examine the verb tense in verse 5. *A fait accompli.*]
- Q Where was Abram when the Lord God announced He was confirming His covenant? How can we assume this position when listening the Lord God speak?
- Q What does it mean to be a descendant of Abraham? [Hint: consider Galatians 3:27; to wit, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."]

GENESIS 17:1-8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, Yahweh appeared to him and said,

"I am God Almighty [Hebrew = *El Shaddai*]; walk before me and be blameless. ²I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,

⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram [*exalted father*]; your name will be Abraham, [*father of many*] for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I 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. ⁸The 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."

¹See Genesis 21 with special note on verse 18, Christ tells her, "Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

Genesis 17:9-14. *Here's what **you** need to do.* Father of many, here is what you are to do—you must keep My covenant, and not only you but your descendants as well, for generations to come. Here is how it works:

Every male shall be circumcised. Yes, I said circumcised. For this circumcision will be a sign of the relationship between you and Me. Every time you urinate, you will remember this covenant. Every time you make love, both of you will remember the covenant between us.

So, for after your male children are eight days old, you are to circumcise them; even those who are not your actual offspring, all the male children born in your household and those slaves you bought. So, whether born in your household or purchased with money, they've must be circumcised.

My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.

And, this is serious! Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off. When he is cut off from his people, he has broken My covenant. Period. End of sentence. End of paragraph. End of essay.

- Q Why are we called upon to “keep His covenant?”
- Q To what extent is this possible (note 17:1), even with the lifelong sign of circumcision?
- Q What made Abraham's and Ishmael's and the whole male household's circumcision special? [Hint: what makes bowing the head a sign of respect? Note how Jesus prayed in John 17:1]
- Q Why did the Lord God use the act of circumcision as a sign of the covenant between the heirs of Abraham and Himself?

GENESIS 17:9-14

Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

¹¹You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²For 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. ¹³Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Genesis 17:15-27. Now about Sarai. Father of many, God continued, your wife Sarai will now be called Sarah,² for through her I will give you a son. Like you, I will bless her so she will become the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

Abraham fell facedown, again; but this time not in respect, but with laughter. He thought to himself, as if Yahweh couldn't hear him, "Will a son be born to a man aged 100 and a woman aged 90?" Then out loud he said to God, "If only 'God Hears' (Ishmael) might live under your blessing!"

Yes, God Hears will, but Sarah³ will bear you a son and you will call him "He Laughs" [Hebrew = *Isaac*]. It is through "He Laughs" that this everlasting covenant is established.

As for Ishmael —I am I am. I have heard you, and I will bless Ishmael; he will be fruitful and I will greatly increase his descendants in number. He will be the ancestor of 12 rulers, and I will make him into a great nation!

BUT... My covenant will be established with he laughs, who Sarah will birth within the year. After this discussion, the Lord God left Abraham—He "went up" as it were.

So, on that very day, Abraham did as he was told. He took Ishmael and all the males in his household, including those bought, and circumcised them. Abraham and his teen-aged Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day.

- Q Why did Abraham laugh? What was God's response to Abraham laughing about God's declaration?
- Q Why did the Lord God allow Abram and Sarai to participate in adultery even though Isaac, he laughs, was to be born with 14 years of their complicity?
- Q Why did the Lord God choose to bless the result of this union between Hagar and Abram?
- Q But, why, did He establish His covenant through Isaac instead of Ishmael?

²Both "Sarai" and "Sarah" mean "princess."

³Sarah got in on the disrespectful joke as well; see Genesis 18, especially verse 12: "So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master [or *husband*] is old, will I now have this pleasure?' "

GENESIS 17:15-27

God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ 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?"

¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac [*he laughs*]. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." ²² When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

²³ 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. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, ²⁵ and his son Ishmael was thirteen; ²⁶ Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. ²⁷ And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

17:1 *ninety-nine years old.* Thirteen years had passed since Ishmael's birth (see 16:16; 17:24-25).

God Almighty. The Hebrew (*El-Shaddai*) perhaps means "God, the Mountain One," either highlighting the invincible power of God or referring to the mountains as God's symbolic home (see Ps 121:1). It was the special name by which God revealed himself to the patriarchs (see Ex 6:3). *Shaddai* occurs 31 times in the book of Job and 17 times in the rest of the Bible.

walk before me and be blameless. Perhaps equivalent to "walk *with* me and be blameless" (see 5:22; 6:8-9). After Abram's and Sarai's attempt to obtain the promised offspring by using a surrogate mother and complicity in adultery, God appeared to Abram. The Lord made it clear that, if Abram were to receive God's covenanted benefits, he must be God's *faithful and obedient* servant. His faith must be accompanied by the "obedience that comes from faith" (Romans 1:5).

17:2 *my covenant.* See 12:2-3; 13:14-16; 15:4-5. The covenant is God's. God calls it "My covenant" nine times in vv. 2-21, and He initiates (see 15:18), confirms (v. 2) and establishes (v. 7) it.

numbers. See 13:16 and note. Earlier God had covenanted to keep His promise concerning the land (ch. 15); here He broadens His covenant to include the promised offspring.

17:5 *your name will be.* By giving Abram a new name (see Ne 9:7) God marked him in a special way as his servant (see 1:5; 2:19).

17:6 *nations . . . kings.* This promise came also to Sarah (v. 16) and was renewed to Jacob (35:11; see 48:19). It referred to the proliferation of Abraham's offspring, who, like the descendants of Noah (see ch. 10), would someday become many nations and spread over the earth. Ultimately it finds fulfillment in such passages as Ro 4:16-18; 15:8-12; Gal 3:29; Rev 7:9; 21:24.

17:7 *everlasting.* From God's standpoint (see vv. 13,19), but capable of being broken from man's standpoint (see v. 14; cf. Isa 24:5; Jer 31:32). *to be your God.* The heart of God's covenant promise, repeated over and over in the Hebrew Scriptures (see, e.g., v. 8; Jer 24:7; 31:33; Eze 34:30-31; Hos 2:23; Zec 8:8). This is God's pledge to be the protector of His people and the One who provides for their well-being and guarantees their future blessing (see 15:1).

17:8 *land.* See 12:7; 15:18; Ac 7:5. *everlasting possession.* The land, though an everlasting possession given by God, could be, and was, temporarily lost because of disobedience (see Dt 28:62-63; 30:1-10).

17:9 *As for you.* Balances the "As for me" of v. 4. Having reviewed his covenanted commitment to Abraham (see 15:8-21), and having broadened it to include the promise of offspring, God now called upon Abraham to make a covenanted commitment to him—to "walk before me and be blameless" (v. 1). *keep my covenant.* **Participation in the blessings** of the Abrahamic covenant was *conditioned* on obedience (see 18:19; 22:18; 26:4-5).

17:10 *circumcised.* Circumcision was God's appointed "sign of the covenant" (v. 11), which signified Abraham's covenanted commitment to the Lord—that the Lord alone would be his God, whom he would trust and serve. It symbolized a self-maledictory oath (analogous to the oath to which God had submitted

⁴Adapted, corrected and revised by D. Thomas Porter from Compton's Interactive NIV © 1996.

himself; see note on 15:17): "If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring (see v. 14) as I have cut off my foreskin." Thus Abraham was to place himself under the rule of the Lord as his King, consecrating himself, his offspring and all he possessed to the service of the Lord.

For circumcision as signifying consecration to the Lord see Ex 6:12 where "faltering lips" comes from "uncircumcised lips;" Lev 19:23' 26:41; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25-26; Eze 44:7,9.

NOTE: Other nations also practiced circumcision (see Jeremiah 9:25-26; Ezekiel 32:18-19), but the Lord God took this ordinary act and gave it spiritual significance. Just as the fourth cup at Passover became a special sign to commemorate the sacrificial blood of Jesus the Christ.

17:11 *sign of the covenant.* See 9:12; 15:17. As the covenant sign, circumcision also (see note on verse 10 above) marked Abraham as the one to whom God had made covenant commitment (15:7-21) in response to Abraham's faith, which he "*credited . . . to him as righteousness*" (15:6). Paul comments on this aspect of the covenant sign in Romans 4:11.

17:12 *eight days old.* See 21:4 and Ac 7:8 (Isaac); Lk 1:59 (John the Baptist); 2:21 (Jesus); Php 3:5 (Paul). Abraham was 99 years old when rite of circumcision was performed on him (see v. 24). Arabs, who consider themselves descendants of Ishmael, are circumcised at the age of 13 (see v. 25). For them, as for many other peoples, it serves as a rite of transition from childhood to manhood, thus into full participation in the community.

17:14 *cut off from his people.* Removed from the covenant people by divine judgment (see on v. 10).

17:16 *son.* Fulfilled in Isaac (see 21:2-3).

17:17 *laughed.* In temporary disbelief (see 18:12; cf. Romans 4:19-21). The verb is a pun on the name "Isaac," which means "he laughs."

17:20 *father of twelve rulers.* Fulfilled in Genesis 25; to wit:

¹²This is the account of Abraham's son Ishmael, whom Sarah's maidservant, Hagar the Egyptian, bore to Abraham.

¹³These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, listed in the order of their birth: Nebaioth the firstborn of Ishmael, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, ¹⁴Mishma, Dumah, Massa, ¹⁵Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶These were the sons of Ishmael, and these are the names of the twelve tribal rulers according to their settlements and camps. ¹⁷Altogether, Ishmael lived a hundred and thirty-seven years. He breathed his last and died, and he was gathered to his people. ¹⁸His descendants settled in the area from Havilah to Shur, near the border of Egypt, as you go toward Asshur. And they lived in hostility toward [or *lived to the east of*] all their brothers.

17:21 Paul cites the choice of Isaac (and not Ishmael) as one proof of God's sovereign right to choose to save by grace alone (see Romans 9:6-13). *by this time next year.* See 21:2.

17:22 *God went up from him.* A solemn conclusion to the conversation.

17:23 *On that very day.* Abraham was characterized by prompt obedience (see 12:4).