Genesis 17 – The Sign and Seal of God's Covenant

I. The Clarification of God's Covenant (1-16)
    A. The Covenant Explained (1-3a)
        1. God Announces Himself Again To Abram (1a)
            a. God Gave Abram No Word For 13 or 14 years
                i. Abram is now 99 years old
                ii. Chapter 16 took place when Abram was 85
                - Chapter 16 ends with a dismal failure on Abram and Sarai's part
                - Chapter 16 also ends with the astounding grace and faithfulness of God to Abram, Sarai, and Hagar
                iii. Another decade and a half has passed and the only son Abram has is Ishmael
                iv. It has been 23 or 24 years since God's initial promise to Abram
            b. God Announces Himself to Abram as "El-Shaddai" (God Almighty)
                i. This is the first time this name is used in the Bible
                ii. This name conveys God's omnipotence and sovereignty
                iii. This name will regularly be associated with the promise of descendents (See 28:3; 35:11; 48:3-4)
                iv. God is Almighty – Able To Fulfill His Word
        2. God Explicitly Defines The Covenant (1b-2)
            a. God Gives Abram Two Covenant Stipulations (1b)
                i. Abram is Commanded to "Walk Before God"
                - This means to place oneself under the guidance, supervision and protection of God
                - To live his life openly and honestly before God, following after God's will and ways
                ii. Abram is Commanded to Be "Perfect" (i.e. Blameless)
                - The Word is *Tamim* which means whole or complete
                - The idea is not "sinlessness" but being wholly devoted to God (singleminded)
                - This would be the same way Noah and Job were described as "blameless" in their generations
                iii. Abram is Commanded To Respond To the Covenant

- Note: These are not indicative of a "new" covenant. The covenant has already been formalized with Abram decades ago (chapter 15)
- God is explaining Abram's expected response to the covenant that is already in place
- God is explaining a relationship between Abram and God which is deeper than God simply making promises. Abram is expected to respond.

b. God Promises To Multiply Abram (2)

i. The word "make" (establish) in this verse is the standard Hebrew word meaning "to give" (*natan)*

ii. God is affirming His Covenant that is "given" to Abram – not basing a future covenant on whether or not Abram obeys correctly.

3. Abram Responds To God in Worship (3a)

a. Abram Falls on His Face Before God

B. The Covenant Promises of God Defined (3b-8)

1. God Will Multiply Abram's Descendants (3b-6)

a. Abram Will Be Father of Many Nations (3b-4)

i. Instead of just the father of a nation, he will be the father of a "multitude of nations"

ii. This includes being the father of Israel through Isaac, Edom through Esau, Arabs through Ishmael, etc.

iii. This includes the spiritual reality as well. He is the father of all who trust in Christ from every tribe, tongue, and nation

- *And* [Abraham] *the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.* – Romans 4:12-13
- See also Paul's argument in Galatians 3

b. Abram Will Be Called Abraham (5)

i. God changes Abram's name

ii. Abram means "exalted father"

iii. Abraham means "father of multitude"

c. Abraham Will Produce Royal Lines (6)

i. Abraham won't just be the father of a lot of people. Royalty and kingly lines will come from him. This would have been an amazing promise for Abraham the tent-dweller.
ii. Abraham certainly isn't a king in the land but all the kings Israel (and other nations) will come from Abraham
iii. This includes David and his descendents which culminate in the true king – Jesus Christ
iv. The New Testament Capitalizes on this idea in the very first verse of Matthew.
- *The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*. – Matt. 1:1
- Matthew makes much of the fact that Jesus is from David's line and Abraham's.

2. God Will "Be God" To Abraham's Descendants (7, 8b)
   a. God will be in relationship to Abraham's descendants
   b. Those who are the sons of promise will forever be in covenant with God
      i. The idea of "seed" goes back to the initial promise made to Adam in the garden (Gen. 3:15)
      ii. This foreshadows the salvation of Jesus Christ not simply those who are genetically descended from Abraham
      iii. *Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.* – Romans 9:6-8
3. God Will Give Abraham's Descendants The Land (8)
   a. As all the other promises God has given here, the New Testament points us to the reality of the promise. The true promised land which is the whole recreated earth. (Note: if we refuse to see "the land" in its New Testament fulfillment, we must also see circumcision as still binding on the covenant community)
      i. Paul interpreted the "land" promise as meaning the perfected world
         - *For the promise, that he should be* ***the heir of the world****, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith*. – Romans 4:13

ii. The Writer of Hebrews also tells us that Abraham wasn't looking to inherit a small strip of land that would have never held all of his descendants anyway (if they were more than the stars)
    - *For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*. – Hebrews 11:10
    - *These* [Abraham, Sarah, etc.] *all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.* ***But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly****: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God****: for he hath prepared for them a city****.*– Hebrews 11:13-16

b. Notice the biblical progression of the "land of promise"
    i. The Garden of Eden was the perfect land which was lost
    ii. Abraham is promised a land that is described as a "new" Eden
    iii. Moses is given a land to bring the people from Egypt to – because of lack of faith, the people are diverted into the wilderness for 40 years
    iv. Joshua finally takes the promised land
        - Joshua 11:23 - *So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes.*
        - Joshua 21:43-45 - ***And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers****; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein.* ***And the Lord gave them rest round about, according to all that he sware unto their fathers****: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand.*

There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.

v. The Land was Enjoyed by Israel Until the Days after Solomon
    - As Solomon dedicates the Temple he says, "*Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel,* ***according to all that he promised****: there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant.*" – 1 Kings 8:56

vi. The Land was lost because of sin, idolatry, and division
    - Assyria destroys the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deports the people
    - Babylon destroys the Southern Kingdom of Judah and deports the people

vii. The Prophets foretell a restoration to the promised land when the people repent and turn back to God
    - The land is described as a new Eden (See Isa. 51:3 and Eze. 36:35)

viii. Cyrus of Persia decrees that the people may return to the land
    - Very few people return, most choose to stay in exile
    - Those returning rebuild the temple and the city, but it never reaches the glory it once had (See Ezra 3:12-13)
    - Some of the people were back in the land but they were certainly not free – they were slaves of the Persians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans

ix. The New Testament opens with the people still dispersed or under Roman oppression
    - This is why Paul and the New Testament writers equate Abraham's promise with the fulfillment of the new creation
    - *"Because the creature* [i.e. creation] *itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.* – Romans 8:21-22

C. The Covenant Responsibility of Abraham (9-14)

1. Abraham's People Must Keep God's Covenant (9)
    a. The "keeping" of the covenant is defined in the next section by submitting to the sign of the covenant
    b. Circumcision, like the land, is a physical sign that points to a greater reality
2. Abraham Must Bear The Sign of The Covenant (10-11)
    a. Circumcision of the foreskin is a physical sign which signifies one as being part of the covenant community
        i. The circumcision itself is just a sign – it does not automatically make one part of the covenant (remember Ishmael is circumcised in this chapter also)
        ii. Many who are physically circumcised in Israel are separated from God because they have no faith
            - *Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the children of Ammon, and Moab, and all that are in the utmost corners, that dwell in the wilderness: for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart.* – Jeremiah 9:26
            - *And the Lord thy God will **circumcise thine hear**t, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.* – Deut. 30:6
        iii. The circumcision of the heart (i.e. faith) is what brings man into Abraham's covenant (Circumcision of the foreskin is just the sign)
            - *In whom also ye **are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands**, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also **ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God**, who hath raised him from the dead.* – Colossians 2:11-12
            - *For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.* – Galatians 5:6
            - *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.* – Galatians 6:15

iv. Remember Abraham was saved before He was circumcised
- Romans 4:9-12 - *Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.*

3. Abraham's Household and Descendants Must Bear the Sign (12-13)
4. To Forsake The Sign is To Forsake The Covenant (14)
    a. God expects Abraham's faith to be demonstrated in his obedience
    b. God expects Abraham's household to subject themselves to circumcision believing that God will keep His promise

D. The Covenant Role of Sarah (15-16)
1. God Changes Sarai's name To Sarah (15)
2. God Promises a Son Through Sarah (16a)
    a. Sarah will be part of the bearing of the covenant seed
3. God Promises Sarah Will Mother Nations (16b)
    a. Sarah is bound to Abraham's promise
    b. Abraham's wife will indeed be part of the promise made to Abraham

II. The Obedience Of The Covenant By Faith (17-27)

A. Abraham Doubts The Covenant Promise (17-18)
1. Abraham Laughs At The Promise (17)
    a. Abraham Doubts Because of His Age
    b. Abraham Doubts Because of Sarah's Age
        i. It isn't clear whether Abraham is simply having a moment of frustration or flat out disbelief
2. Abraham Pleads For Ishmael's Inclusion in the Covenant (18)
    a. Abraham thinks he and Sarah are too old to bear any children, but he already has a son…Ishmael

        b. Abraham begs God to make the son already here part of the covenant

B. God Reassures Abraham of His Covenant Promises (19-22)
    1. God Names Abraham's Covenant Son (19)
        a. God refuses to allow Ishmael as the covenant son
            i. God doesn't need our counsel or suggestions
        b. God names the covenant son, Isaac
        c. *Yitshaq* (where the name Isaac comes from) means laughter. Because Abraham laughs (and Sarah will also laugh in the next chapter) their son is named "laughter"
    2. God Promises To Bless Ishmael (20)
        a. Ishmael is the son of Abraham so because of grace, he will be blessed
        b. God says to Abraham "I have heard you" when he asks about Ishmael – noting that Ishmael means "God hears"
        c. Ishmael will be fruitful and a great nation but he will not be the son of promise
    3. God Pronounces The Covenant Son Within A Year (21-22)
        a. God promises that the covenant son will be born to 89 year old Sarah within the year

C. Abraham Obeys God's Covenant In Faith (23-27)
    1. Abraham circumcises His Household That Day (23)
        a. Although Abraham had a moment of doubt, in the end he goes forth in faith and circumcises his entire household
        b. To circumcise oneself at age 99 is true devotion and faith
    2. Abraham And Ishmael Are Circumcised The Same Day (24-27)
        a. The ages of both Abraham and Ishmael are given to demonstrate the act of faith
        b. Faith is never separated from obedience
        c. Obedience is a by-product of faith