

God Affirms His Covenant and Promise of Isaac

Genesis 17:1-18:15

Focus Verse

“I 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.” – Genesis 17:7

- God’s Symbol of an Unbreakable Covenant – Genesis 17
- God’s Call to an Unwavering Faith – Genesis 18:1-15

Engage

Faith is believing God for what seems impossible. **While believing God stretches us, faith does not defy reason.** What God has revealed about Himself and your own experiences with His faithfulness prove that trusting God is not unreasonable. God often leads you to trust that His power can deliver what human resources cannot. God calls you to believe what is not yet visible. The view from your side includes real human limitations. Faith calls for a view that incorporates God’s unlimited power. God tenderly and consistently orchestrates your life to nurture your faith. In times of reflection, do you increasingly find His promises true as you experience His provision?

Abram and Sarai were called to trust God for the impossible. God understood their human limitations and repeatedly intervened to deepen their trust in His yet unseen provision. Step-by-step, God led them to believe that what He said was true, even if that truth defied physical realities. Where in your life does faith in God seem unreasonable? What is God asking you to believe that seems impossible? Do your impossible circumstances seem more real than the God for whom nothing is impossible? **God gives, nurtures and preserves true faith.**

God’s Symbol of an Unbreakable Covenant – Genesis 17

God faithfully led Abram in Canaan for almost 24 years before the events recorded in Genesis 17.¹ Abram’s faith both wavered and grew through those years. God’s commitment and personal involvement to strengthen Abram’s faith is clear. God called Abram with clear and decisive promises and repeated those promises multiple times.² He proved His faithfulness to Abram by delivering him from his own mistakes and warring kings. **God perseveres to keep His promises and build faith in His children.**

Facedown Before Almighty God – 17:1-3

About 13 years passed between the end of Genesis 16 and the beginning of Genesis 17. This suggests God had not given Abram new direction or communication during that time. Abram and Sarai knew God’s repeated promises and remembered His personal interactions. But as those years of silence multiplied, perhaps they assumed their self-determined solution to their childlessness succeeded. Surely Hagar shared her story

of God’s personal rescue and words of blessing to her. They witnessed Ishmael’s birth, first steps and growth toward becoming a young man. **Without further correction from God, Abram and Sarai might have lived as if Ishmael were God’s promised son.** At this point in their story, God stepped in again.

“I am God Almighty”

God’s voice startled Abram’s ears with a strong statement of His Person and power, “**I am God Almighty.**” Stop and think about the power of this moment. In Hebrew, the name God disclosed here is *El Shaddai*. Scholars debate about its original meaning, but this context affirms God as the Almighty One. He is the One who possesses unlimited might and before whom all creation bows. No human can know truth about God apart from what He discloses about Himself. Scripture reveals many names for God, enlarging our understanding of the untold vastness of His character. Words cannot adequately capture the multifaceted character of God.

“Walk before me faithfully and be blameless”

God holds people responsible to believe and act on everything He reveals to them. God’s command to Abram to “walk before me faithfully and be blameless” demands what Abram cannot offer in his own strength. Believers are called to live to obey and please God. Yet no human, by their own desire, will or strength, can be scrutinized by God and found without moral fault or wrongdoing in motive or action. We cannot be blameless or faithful on our own. Faith trusts God to make the impossible possible and supplies what human effort cannot. As Paul later explains, God “will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”³

To “walk before” God implies living in continual awareness of His nearness. God’s omnipresence comforts us, but His personal nearness upholds us. Believers can live knowing God’s abiding presence and constant care. God actively involves Himself in your life.⁴ He proactively engages to draw you to Himself and build your faith. When fear and impatience creep in, you can easily forget He is near. God preserves your faith for His purposes. His preserving power, not your strength, holds your salvation secure. Jesus promised that no one can take you out of God’s hand (John 10:28). No temptation, no failure, no person, not even Satan can cause God’s children to lose their salvation. You can be sure God will accomplish His purposes for you because He preserves you.

“Abram fell facedown”

Abram responded to the voice and message of God in abject humility and worship. He “fell facedown” as his physical posture reflected his position before God Almighty. He was rightly overwhelmed by the Lord’s sovereign presence and loving guidance. In a day of casual disregard for the majestic nature of God, we do well to learn from Abram. **A proper view of God results in profound reverence, awe and humility toward Him.** While God comes near to us relationally, He stands above us in every way. Abram’s heartfelt reaction and physical posture of complete surrender reveals the nature of his relationship with God.

A New Name for Abram – 17:4-8

God again reminded Abram of the promises He would fulfill. God said, “As for me,” as if to say, “The strength of this covenant rests on my character, not your performance.” **God repeats His promises to confirm Abram’s faith and the unshakeable certainty of what He had declared.**

God confirmed His message to Abram by giving him a new name that incorporated His promises. In Scripture, a new God-given name often represents a new identity, life purpose or power.⁵ Abram, “*father of many*,” became Abraham, “*father of many nations*.” **Every time**

Abraham heard his name or introduced himself, he would be called to faith. With this name change, God repeated His unwavering promises:

- **Future** – exceeding fruitfulness and greatness of nations and kings
- **Duration** – everlasting covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants
- **Land** – the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession
- **Lord** – “I will be your/their God” (repeated three times)

A New Covenant Sign for Abraham’s People – 17:9-14

God prescribed the sign of male circumcision for Abraham and his male descendants. Participation in circumcision affirmed each man’s acceptance of God’s covenant personally and as representative for his family. This command fit the cultural context understood in this day. Throughout the Old Testament times, male patriarchs were responsible to lead their clans or family units. Therefore, circumcision did not exclude women from the covenant but confirmed God’s blessing for the whole family unit through the male patriarch. Through this sign, God’s Old Testament covenant people indicated their submission to walk before Him in newness of life. Male circumcision:

- was the **outward sign** of the old covenant and the Abrahamic promise.
- **distinguished** Abraham’s male descendants from other people as set apart for God.
- **confirmed** the covenant blessing for the whole family unit through the male patriarch.
- served as the **seal** (promise) of obedience within the community that identified with God.
- **symbolized** cutting off the old life of self-effort, failure and sin.
- related **faith** to the great hope of a physical descendant of Abraham to be Savior.

A New Name for Sarai – 17:15-16

God not only invested in Abraham’s faith, but also in Sarai’s. First, God gave Sarai a renewed form of her name, changing it to Sarah (both names mean *princess*). Then He gave Abraham detailed information about his promised son that he could not misinterpret. **God clearly revealed Sarah would have a son and become the mother of nations and kings.** Abraham and Sarah’s descendants would inherit God’s promised land in covenant relationship with Him.

A Personal God

The relational dimension of covenant, rising from both the Old and New Testaments, distinguishes both Judaism and Christianity from many other religions. Often in other religions, their god(s) remain so distant and different from humanity that relating to him/them is seen as impossible. It is important to recognize this difference in discussing the Christian faith with those of other beliefs. It is helpful to recognize how this spiritual distinction of personal relationship with God, likely missing in their lives, might enter conversations. What a privilege it is to know God personally!

A New Promise of a Soon-to-be-Delivered Son – 17:17-22

This clarifying promise regarding Sarah stretched Abraham's faith once again as God led him to trust Him more than his own understanding. Abraham fell facedown, this time laughing in confusion. He reminded God of the physical impossibility of their situation. Because he believed it impossible for Sarah to bear a son, he asked God for what did seem possible – blessing for Ishmael. God immediately extended blessing to Ishmael but decreed that He would establish His covenant with Isaac, a son from Sarah's body, not Ishmael.

God made the “impossible” son real by announcing his name. The heir of the covenant would be named Isaac, which means “laughter.” The miraculously God-given child of promise would be born “by this time next year.” In other words, after waiting and wondering for about 23 years, Abraham and Sarah would soon experience God's promise in the form of a real baby they could hold, touch and love.

A New Step of Obedience – 17:23-27

God's appearance and confirmation so impacted Abraham that he immediately put his faith into action. “On that very day,” “every male” and “as God told him” confirm Abraham's complete and immediate obedience. He promptly fulfilled his part of the conditional covenant of circumcision. He, Ishmael and all males in his household were circumcised that day. Abraham's actions demonstrated his growing faith.

Circumcision symbolizes inward separation from any rival to God, His laws or love.⁶ This external sign points to an internal reality. God alone has the power to circumcise hearts from wrong and misplaced loves – our idols. He supernaturally creates true love for Him within us. Abraham's descendants through Ishmael and Isaac still commonly practice the physical sign of male circumcision. This distinguishes them from other peoples in most parts of the world. Circumcision later identified Abraham's descendants as a community of faith under the expanded Mosaic covenant and tabernacle.

God's Call to an Unwavering Faith – Genesis 18:1-15

Genesis 17 and 18 each contain God's direct communication to prepare Abraham and Sarah for Isaac's supernatural birth. Both chapters use the phrase “this time next year,” suggesting the meetings occurred close together, but they also differ significantly, indicating two separate encounters.

The Joy of Fellowship with the Lord – 18:1-8

Abraham saw three men nearby as he enjoyed the shade of his tent at noonday. Though Abraham did not recognize the men, the text clearly identifies one of the three visitors as the LORD Himself (18:1). Many believe this visitor to be the preincarnate Christ, showing Himself on earth before He was born to Mary. The other two visitors were angels. Next week's study shows these same two angels came to deliver Lot and to administer the Lord's judgment on Sodom.

Abraham graciously and eagerly received the three visitors and served them with modesty and

grace. He hurried to meet them, bowed, offered to serve them and provided food and rest. He repeatedly identified himself as their servant. When they accepted, he hurried Sarah and helped serve a fine meal. No one could doubt Abraham's desire to offer these strangers his best.

The customs of that day positioned the male household leader as official host. Abraham served his guests while Sarah stayed in the women's quarters. However, Sarah was the intentional focus of this visit. **Sarah and Abraham needed to hear the specifics of God's promise together.** Sarah's faith needed to grow as she prepared to become the mother of the promised son. Again, we see how God understands human thinking and intentionally nurtures faith in His people.

The Call to Faith in the Lord – 18:9-15

After the guests ate, they asked for Sarah, who was covertly listening at the entrance of the tent. Imagine Sarah's surprise when the conversation turned toward

her. **Sarah heard, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son” (18:10).** These words clearly called Sarah’s faith to grow. While every birth reflects God’s creative work, Isaac’s birth required God’s miraculous intervention.

Sarah silently laughed to herself in unbelief, just like Abraham (17:17). She knew she was long past child-bearing age and her husband was very old. Not only did Sarah benefit from hearing this shocking news herself, she faced the amazing reality that God knew her secret thoughts. When in fear Sarah denied her laughter, she learned she could not deceive the Lord, who knew everything about her. The God who could read her hidden thoughts had the power to enable her to conceive and bear a son.

The Lord used well-placed questions to draw out important truths for Abraham and Sarah. The first question to Abraham about why Sarah laughed forced them to acknowledge the physical impossibility of Isaac’s birth and that God read Sarah’s thoughts. The second question, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” brought them face-to-face with God’s omnipotence. Nothing is impossible for God. Nothing God accomplishes depletes Him of power or takes effort. As humans, some things are easy, some things are hard and some things are impossible. Not so for God. God’s

knowledge and power have no limits. **The God who knows everything can do anything He chooses to do.**

Two thousand years later, the angel Gabriel announced Jesus’ birth to His mother Mary, a virgin, with the words, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”⁷ Thirty years after that, the religious Nicodemus asked Jesus how an old man could be born again. Jesus answered, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”⁸ **God’s unlimited power upholds every one of His promises.** We worship the God for whom nothing is impossible.

Abraham and Sarah’s story reminds believers that a promise delayed is not a promise denied. They waited many long years to see God’s promise become reality. They unwisely tried to help God fulfill His promise with their own plans and on their timetable. God’s purposes and plans prevailed. God continued to invest in their faith, affirming His promises and addressing their doubts. The long-awaited birth of their son held the key to all God’s covenant promises.

God’s promise required something only God could do, but Abraham and Sarah also had to act on His promise by faith. **God gives, nurtures and preserves true faith.** The time was announced with the words, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah required waiting, but would be realized. God had not forgotten them or changed His mind. Abraham and Sarah spent almost 25 years waiting for what seemed impossible. At times, they misinterpreted and misapplied God’s promises to make sense of impossible circumstances. But God persevered. Their names constantly reminded them God transforms unbelief into joyful faith. Abraham, “the father of many nations,” would have a son named Isaac, which means “laughter.” God consistently appeared throughout Abraham and Sarah’s lives to renew their hope in His presence, power and promises.

God established His covenant with Abraham and established circumcision as the sign of His unique relationship with His people. **Jesus Christ brought a new and greater covenant through which believers receive His gift of salvation**

and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God makes believers alive with Christ, “circumcised” spiritually. Through His power, believers can live lives distinctively marked by love and obedience. Through faith, believers recognize the freedom Christ has won and can live for the glory of God.⁹ By faith, believers can “cut off” and bury specific sins and put on Christlikeness instead.

Abraham had no sons at age 75 when God called him as His special instrument of blessing to the world. Abraham’s promised son represented God’s plan to bring His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. God overruled human impossibilities in Isaac’s supernatural birth. Isaac’s descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ, was also conceived miraculously. Jesus Christ is the One in whom God’s promises to Abraham are ultimately fulfilled. **Faith calls us to believe God can do the impossible.**

Apply It

God wants us to know and experience His love and power personally. To do so, He often allows us to face challenges that defy human solutions. Hebrews 11:11-12 tells us both Abraham and Sarah had to realize, beyond any doubt, their own bodies were “as good as dead.” God often allows us to calculate the impossibility of what we face and quantify insufficient human solutions. Only then do we understand how desperately we need God. God often waits to intervene until we know there is no chance or seemingly no hope. Jesus never says, “figure it out,” He says, “follow me.”¹⁰ What situation are you facing that is beyond your understanding and solutions? What if God does not meet your need the way you think He will? How is God reassuring you as you wait on Him in an “impossible” situation?

When God accomplishes what only He can do, He alone receives the glory.

Even devout Christians wrestle with doubt, just like Abraham and Sarah. This struggle can be frustrating. Why do we wrestle with doubt, even when we earnestly want to trust God? Doubts rise because human understanding limits what we can see and comprehend. We lack God’s omniscience; we cannot see all outcomes to all issues. We lack God’s omnipotence; our human strength grows weak. Difficulties test and purify our faith, allowing spiritual muscle to grow. As we trust God rather than ourselves, we experience His faithfulness in profoundly personal ways. How are you struggling with doubt? Do not allow doubt to discourage you. Instead, honestly confess to God your doubts and unbelief. Ask God to strengthen your faith – to help

you trust Him. **Recognize that the challenges that tempt you to doubt God’s provision also provide an opportunity to trust Him to do what only He can do.** God knows everything about you. He knows your thoughts and even your words before they are formed on your tongue.¹¹ Sarah was so taken aback that the Lord read her thoughts that she denied the truth. God’s intimate knowledge of you allows Him to speak to you in ways you will uniquely hear. God knew Sarah needed to hear her own name mentioned in the promise He declared. God spoke “Sarah” to Sarah. He will do the same for you and always with the purpose of building your faith. **God wants you to understand what is true and to trust Him in specific ways.** What and how is God speaking to you so you will hear Him? How is God intentionally developing your faith? How will you respond?

Go Deeper

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God’s Word in this week’s lesson.

1: **Abram in Canaan:** Genesis 16:3, 16; 17:1

2: **Promises to Abram:** Genesis 12; 15

3: **Blameless:** Psalms 15:2; 19:13; 1 Corinthians 1:8; Hebrews 9:14

4: **God’s presence:** Psalms 73:28; 119:151; 145:18; Acts 23:11

5: **New identities:** Genesis 32:28; John 1:42; Revelation 2:17

6: **Circumcision:** Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 44:7

7: **Nothing impossible:** Luke 1:37 (ESV)

8: **All things possible:** Mark 10:26-27

9: **Freedom in Christ:** Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 2:14-15; 3:5-17

10: **Follow Jesus:** Matthew 4:19; 8:22; John 1:43; 12:26; 21:22

11: **God’s intimate knowledge:** Psalm 139

The Doctrine of Covenant

Genesis 15 and 17 describe God's covenant with Abraham. A covenant is a chosen relationship in which two parties make a binding promise to one another. **In biblical language a covenant is a promise of God made to an individual or group.** Covenants form the backbone of the biblical story and collectively serve as the foundation for God's promise to bring redemption to His people. There are typically two types of covenants:

- Conditional ("If you do A, then I will do B.")
- Unconditional ("I will do C regardless of what you do.")

Throughout Scripture, God initiates five primary covenants with humanity to relate and bind Himself to us for our benefit. These five covenants are as follows:

The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:1-17)

After the Flood, God established an unconditional covenant with Noah to signify a new beginning for humanity. The Noahic covenant is God's promise to preserve life on earth until redemption is accomplished.

The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15 and 17)

The Abrahamic covenant plays a central role in the biblical storyline. God unconditionally promised Abraham land, offspring and blessing. God's promise to Abraham finds its culmination in Jesus Christ, the true son of Abraham (Galatians 3:16).

The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19; 20; 24:1-8)

The Mosaic covenant was a temporary and conditional covenant between God and Israel that defined the time between the Exodus and Jesus' earthly life and ministry. The Mosaic covenant was both revelatory and regulatory in that it revealed aspects of God's character to His people and regulated life for the people of God. Unfortunately, Israel failed to uphold their side of the agreement and endured exile and tragedy as a result.

The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:1-17)

The Davidic covenant is an expansion of God's covenant with Abraham. God unconditionally promised David an eternal kingdom, house and throne. The promises given to Abraham would be secured through the Davidic ruler, who is Jesus Christ.

The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 8:6, 8; 9:15; 12:24)

The new covenant is the culmination of all God's promises. Jesus Christ is the mediator of this new covenant and, as such, fulfills all the other covenant relationships. He is the true son of Abraham who brings the blessings of Abraham to the world. He is the faithful Israelite who fulfills the law. He is the obedient king from the line of David who extends God's kingdom of justice and peace to all.

Promises are only as strong as the one who makes the promise. **The strength of God's promises lies with the steadfastness of His unchanging character.** Believing God's promises are certain allows me to live each day with peace and security as I take God at His Word. I do not have to have my life all figured out. I can simply trust and obey God's Word because I know He is faithful.

On the other hand, to question God or His promises leaves me with only what I know and what this world offers. Fear and anxiety will rule my life. I will be "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6) with no assurance, no hope, no freedom from guilt. Truth will constantly be called into question and my relationship with God will constantly be strained. But God has spoken; He has made promises that He has kept and will keep. **God and His promises provide the bedrock for security in this life and for eternity.**