

Lesson 35
The Symbol of the Covenant

Genesis 17:1-27

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The key to this chapter is the word “covenant” for it is used 13 times in this chapter. God is going to make His Covenant to Abram good. Seven times God says, “I will,” indicating that He most certainly will carry out the Covenant (17:6, 7, 8, 19, 21).

B. This chapter is essential for it gives the first mention of circumcision which was an outward symbol that the Jew believed that God would perform His Covenant.

II. COMING OF GOD ANEW 17:1-2

A. Abram was 99 years old when God appeared to him to confirm His Covenant. Abram was 75 when he left Haran, 85 when Ishmael was born and 99 when God assures Abram that he will have a son from his loins. There has been 13 years between Abram’s affair with Hagar in which Ishmael was born and the new appearance of God. Why? Ishmael was a child of the flesh and not a child of the promise, for Abram tried to run ahead of God and help Him fulfill the promise. Since nothing is recorded of these years we may assume that there was no special or new revelation of God’s will during this time. This is the silence of God’s discipline upon Abram. This is a perfect example of God’s blessings being postponed because of willful disobedience.

B. God makes a revelation of Himself to Abram and calls Himself the “Almighty God.” Abram had to learn about the omnipotence of God. God had delayed the fulfillment of a son to Abram until he was incapable of reproducing (Rom. 4:19). Abram had to come to a humanly impossible situation before God would work a miracle of grace. Not until Abram’s body was “dead” would God fulfill His word and give him a son. NOTE. God’s opportunity does not come until man’s extremity is reached. The Lord has a reason for all His delays. God not only does that which is right and best but He always acts at the right and best time.

C. God first calls Abram to walk before Him, which is an exhortation to continue to remain to the divine presence by faith. Perhaps Abram’s faith was weakening and he was no longer anxious about the special seed promised by God. NOTE. God is everywhere present. Whether a man purposes it to be so or not, his life is at all times open before the Lord (Prov. 15:3; Psa. 139:1-3). The believer’s life is lived before the eyes of Him who knows him through and through.

D. Abram is called to be “perfect.” This word actually means complete. God is not calling his servant to sinless perfection but to whole-heartedness in opening his life up by faith to receive what God can be to and do with him. God wants him to reach his full potential in spiritual things.

E. God then reiterates His original covenant to Abram promising that from him would come multiple numbers of people.

III. COVENANT RENEWED 17:3-8

A. It was God who appeared to Abram and this is pure grace. The grace of God always seeks men before they seek Him. So awed was Abram that he fell on his face before God in worship. NOTE. A realization of the grace of God always humbles the true believer.

B. Because of this appearance of God, God changed Abram's name. Abram probably "father of high places" but now his name is changed to Abraham, which means "father of many nations." So numerous will be his seed that great nations and kings will come through it.

C. God establishes this Covenant forever. He will be an everlasting God with an eternal Covenant for Israel. He promises a seed and a land. This will be an "everlasting possession." NOTE. The ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant will take place in the Millennial Age.

IV. CIRCUMCISION THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT 17:9-14

A. Every generation of Jews was commanded to perform the rite of circumcision as a token (sign, symbol) of the covenant. Every male Jew was to be circumcised on the eighth day, for this gave time for a child to be strong enough to have blood coagulated well and to fight infection. NOTE. Circumcision is not an obligation imposed on the human race, but a sign of the covenant, like the rainbow of the Noahic covenant, the Sabbath Day of the Old Covenant and the cup of the New Covenant. It serves to identify the recipients of the covenant, as well as to give a concrete indication that a covenant existed. This rite is alien to modern tastes, but on further reflection the appropriateness of this sign can be seen. Probably it served as a vivid reminder that their seed was set apart unto God. A most effective reminder is a scar on the body. A child of Abraham could not marry a woman worshipping another god(s) without being reminded that he was violating the faith of his parents who imposed the sign on his body. Also, one could not become a proselyte of this Jewish religion without first humbling himself in circumcision.

NOTE. Circumcision is only an outward sign of an inward belief. It is just like the symbol of water baptism. Just as water baptism has nothing to do with salvation but is part of Christian obedience, so circumcision had nothing to do with the salvation of the Jew but it was part of their obedience as believers.

B. The Jewish child that was not circumcised would be "cut off." This probably refers to death but we cannot be absolutely sure. It may mean cut off from the blessings of the Covenant.

V. CALL OF SARAH 17:15-21

A. Now God says for the first time that Sarai will also have a definite part in the bringing forth of the promised son. She too will be the mother of many nations and kings will come from her too. God changes her name from "Sarai" which means "contentious" to "Sarah" which means "princess".

B. This caused Abraham to laugh for he was almost 100 years old and Sarah was 90.

The laugh is not the laugh of unbelief, but of a faith, which, while taking God at His word, considers the news almost too good to be true. This child would be named Isaac, which means "laughter". It is with Isaac that God will establish His covenant and with no one else.

C. Ishmael, now 13, was much loved by Abraham and he asks God that Ishmael might live before Him. Ishmael was not the promised son and the covenant blessings would not come through him but through Isaac, Ishmael was an unbeliever and not an heir to the promise. However, God did promise Abraham that He would bless Ishmael physically but not spiritually. There was to be a great nation from Ishmael and twelve princes. NOTE. Ishmael's descendents are the Arab nations who hold to the Islam religion. They to this day, as a people, are opposed to the true God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

D. God again repeats to Abraham that in Isaac and Isaac alone the covenant would be fulfilled. Isaac was God's sovereign choice for the spiritual and physical blessings of the covenant and God has the

right to bestow blessings on whomever He pleases (Rom. 9:6-13). NOTE. Abraham had much faith in the sovereign God and God saw fit to bless Abraham's faith (Rom. 4:16-20).

VI. COMMAND OBEYED 17:23-27

A. Abraham took his whole family, including Ishmael and his servants, and had them circumcised, NOTE. Circumcision does not make one a true believer because Ishmael was circumcised, but he was not chosen in the promise and never exercised genuine saving faith in the God of the Covenant.

B. Abraham, had now come to real maturity in spiritual things, and, from this time on, he was a different person before God.