

## Genesis Chapter 17 – The Sign of the Covenant – Circumcision.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: <sup>4</sup> “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; <sup>11</sup> and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. <sup>13</sup> He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” <sup>15</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. <sup>16</sup> 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.” <sup>17</sup> 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*?” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!” <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” <sup>22</sup> Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> Abraham *was* ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup> And Ishmael his son *was* thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; <sup>27</sup> and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

### Introduction

Last week we covered Genesis chapter 16 and now we are going to look at Genesis chapter 17. The first thing we notice is that there is a gap of 13 years between these two chapters.

If you read Genesis chapter 16:v. 16 you will discover that Abram was 86 years old when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. When we come to Genesis chapter 17:v. 1 we discover that Abram was now 99 years old. This is a gap of 13 years.

As we read the Old Testament we discovered that God is never in a hurry. He works to his own time table, and along the way, He teaches valuable lessons to his children.

This is the second time in Genesis that we are exposed to teaching about God’s covenant with Abram.

It was introduced to us in chapter 15. God promised Abram that through his off spring a great nation would be born. His descendants were going to be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Abram believed God and he received a righteous credit in his spiritual bank account. Animals were cut in half and a human style covenant agreement was prepared. However God did not allow Abram to walk through the cut animals. Abram was put to sleep and only God Himself walked through the cut animals, appearing as a smoking oven and a burning torch. The significance of this act by God confirmed that it was God's responsibility to fulfill the covenant. Abram had to believe God, but at this stage Abram was not to do anything himself.

We now move to chapter 17 where we learn that God confirms the covenant and actually does require both Abram and his male family and servants to do something as a permanent reminder that they are in a covenant relationship with God.

We are going to divide the chapter up into 4 sections.

1. God confirming his Covenant with Abram and changing his name – v. 1-9.

The first thing that happens is that God introduces himself. He calls Himself "El Shaddai". This Hebrew word means "Almighty". The word occurs only 48 times in the Hebrew Bible. Thirty one of those times are in the book of Job. This Hebrew word is found in passages that promise fertility, land, and abundance. The idea is that God is saying that He has the power and the ability to fulfill the promises that He has made to Abram.

God first of all challenges Abram to walk before Him and be "blameless". God is declaring His personal relationship with Abram. God always wants Abram to be in a right relationship with Himself.

This relationship with God is based upon animal sacrifices. The shed blood of an animal acted as a covering for Abram's sin. Instead of Abram dying for his sin, the animal died in his place.

(Lev. 17:v. 11)

God declared that He was going to make a personal covenant between Himself and Abram.

If there was any doubt in the mind of Abram about what happened in chapter 15 when Abram was put to sleep and God passed through the animals, then now Abram was very certain because God spoke directly to him and confirmed that He was going to make a Covenant with Abram.

In those days people used to make covenants between two people. It was a serious agreement, which bound them to keep that agreement. However it was unheard of for a god or any worshipped deity to make any sort of agreement with man.

Here we have Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, speaking to Abram and promising to make a covenant with him.

What was Abram's response? He fell on his face to the ground. Abram had the right response when he met with God.

God spoke with Abram and He said some important things.

1. God said that His Covenant was between Himself and Abram. It was personal.
2. God promised that Abram would be a Father of many nations.
3. God changed Abram's name to Abraham. The name means "Father of a multitude"
4. God promised that this covenant was going to be an everlasting covenant between Abraham and all his future generations.
5. God promised the land of Canaan as a place for this nation to live.

Most of the information that God gave to Abraham at this stage was a repeat of what God had already said. However there is one word that God has added to what He said in Chapter 15 to Abraham. This added word is the word “Everlasting”.

God was committing Himself to an “Everlasting Covenant” with Abraham and his descendants.

This is important because it means that even today this “Covenant” made by God to Abraham and His descendants is still in force.

God also confirmed this Covenant through Isaac and Jacob – Genesis 26-27.

In other words God’s chosen people, the Jewish nation have a mandate from God to live in Israel today.

The last 70 years of the history of Israel has caused lots of problems because the nations that surround Israel do not want them to be there. However every war that Israel has had to fight since 1948 has been won by Israel, in spite of the fact that they had a smaller army. Jewish people around the world have been returning to Israel at an alarming rate.

They are a nation that is being blessed by God in an amazing way. We don’t hear much about the blessing of Israel in the international News, but they are at the forefront of modern technology, both in medical science, agriculture and education.

Israel leads the world in the number of scientists and technicians in the workforce, with 145 per 10,000, as opposed to 85 in the U.S., over 70 in Japan, and less than 60 in Germany. With over 25% of its work force employed in technical professions. Israel places first in this category as well.

Israel produces more scientific papers per capita than any other nation by a large margin – 109 per 10,000 people – as well as one of the highest per capita rates of patents filed.

According to industry officials, Israel designed the airline industry’s most impenetrable flight security. U.S. officials now look to Israel for advice on how to handle airborne security threats.

I would like to quote from a man by the name of Charles Krauthammer who wrote this in a newspaper called the “Weekly Standard” on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1998.

“Israel is the very embodiment of Jewish continuity: It is the only nation on earth that inhabits the same land, bears the same name, speaks the same language, and worships the same God that it did 3,000 years ago. You dig the soil and you find pottery from Davidic times and 2,000 year old scrolls written in a script remarkably like the one that today advertises ice cream at the corner candy store.”

Israel is a unique nation and it is all because God made an everlasting Covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God promised to bless them and He certainly is today.

## 2. God’s terms of the Covenant – v. 10-14.

In these verses God tells Abraham what the terms of the covenant are.

In v. 10 God told Abraham that He wanted every male child to be circumcised. This had to be done when the child was 8 days old. The act of circumcision had to be performed on all of the slaves that were brought into the Jewish household.

In v. 14 we are told that that if a male person was not circumcised then they would not be part of God's Covenant. They would have broken God's requirements and He was not obligated to fulfill His part of the agreement.

It may seem strange to us for God to mark out His chosen people in such a way, but that is what He did and we need to respect his choice in marking out His covenant people.

Theologians over the years have had all sorts of ideas as to why God chose circumcision as a sign to mark out His Covenant people. I have picked the best one as I feel it is a very good suggestion.

I won't quote the author but this is what he said

"I believe circumcision demonstrates the depth of intimacy God wants to have with his people. He wants such an intimate connection with us that he put the physical mark of his covenant with us in the most intimate possible place.

Furthermore, the removal of the foreskin represents the uncovering of our most hidden parts. Think about it: even when a man is entirely naked, his most private part is still covered by his foreskin. Only under the most intimate of circumstances is he entirely exposed, and then only to the one with whom the intimacy is shared.

God wants that degree of intimacy with us.

This concept is by no means unexpressed in scripture. Marriage is explicitly an earthly picture of the heavenly relationship of Christ and his church.

(Matthew 25: v. 1-13– read in the N.L.T.)

"Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> The five who were foolish didn't take enough olive oil for their lamps, <sup>4</sup> but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil. <sup>5</sup> When the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. <sup>6</sup> "At midnight they were roused by the shout, 'Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and meet him!' <sup>7</sup> "All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. <sup>8</sup> Then the five foolish ones asked the others, 'Please give us some of your oil because our lamps are going out.' <sup>9</sup> "But the others replied, 'We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.' <sup>10</sup> "But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came. Then those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked. <sup>11</sup> Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, 'Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!' <sup>12</sup> "But he called back, 'Believe me, I don't know you!' <sup>13</sup> "So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return.

So I believe that circumcision, in part, represents the total, uninhibited abandonment of modesty and privacy between bridegroom and bride.

As I have said, this is *my opinion*. But I think it's as good an answer as any to the question of why God chose that specific sign."

We will deal with this matter later in our application.

### 3. God changes Abram's wife's name and sets a time for the birth of Isaac – v. 15-22.

Something very exciting happens in these verses. In v. 15-16 God changes Sarai's name to Sarah. Why did He do this? Nobody really knows, because both names mean "Princess"

However we do know that God always has a purpose in what He does, maybe we will discover later.

However what we do know from Revelation chapter 2: v. 17, that if we are a Christian then God is going to give us a new name in heaven. The scholars tell us that this new name that God is going to give us will be a personal and intimate name. It is like the pet name that husbands and wives give to each other. It is extremely personal.

The exciting thing for both Abraham and Sarah was that God told them WHEN their son was going to be born and what name they had to call him.

Don't forget that both Abraham and Sarah had been waiting nearly 25 years and God had not told them WHEN they were going to have a child. However NOW He tells Abraham that it would be at an appointed time next year. (v. 21)

To start with in v. 17 Abraham laughed at God's promise about having a child through Sarah. After all Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 years old.

In v. 18 we are told that Abraham was more interested in Ishmael and his prosperity than in a future son through Sarah.

But God insisted that the baby would come next year and it would be through Abraham's seed through the womb of Sarah.

Yes the impossible was soon to be possible through the power of El Shaddai, the "Mighty God"

In these days we need to believe in an El Shaddai God. We need to believe that anything is possible if it is God's will to perform it.

God is certainly faithful to those things that He promises in the Bible.

#### 4. Abraham obeyed God's command concerning circumcision without delay – v. 23-27.

Abraham did not wait to think about God's request. The very same day God command him to circumcise all the males in his household, he obeyed and followed God's instructions.

He was even circumcised himself at the age of 99 years.

There is not much that we can say about these verses, except that Abraham was convinced that God was well able both to keep His covenant promise, both to produce a great nation through Him and to provide land for him to live in and to bless the whole world one day through his seed.

We now come to make some application from this chapter.

#### Application

1. First of all I would like to consider the reason for the sign of the covenant and how that applies to us today. The sign of the covenant was a very intimate and personal one. God was clearly showing that his relationship with His chosen people through Abraham was going to be very personal and very intimate. When I use the word "intimate" I do not use that word in a sexual way, I use it in a way that describes a deep personal relationship.

Turn with me to Deuteronomy Chapter 7: v. 6-8 in N.K.J.

<sup>6</sup> "For you *are* a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. <sup>7</sup> The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; <sup>8</sup> but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a

mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

These verses clearly tell us that God made a sovereign choice to choose Abraham and his descendants to be a "Holy People".

They were chosen for a personal relationship, and they were to be a special treasure to God, more than any other people in the world.

The sign of the circumcision was a way of God marking out his precious people in order to identify them and to make the point that this relationship was deep and personal.

Now we know that circumcision was not a sign of Salvation. Abraham was declared righteous by God before he was circumcised.

We learnt in Genesis 15: v. 6 that Abram believed in the Lord and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Therefore the sign of the covenant through circumcision was not a sign of salvation. It was a sign that you belonged to Abraham and his family, and that God had made a sovereign choice about this nation.

We now come into the New Testament. Let us read from Romans Chapter 2: v. 25-29. (N.I.T.)

<sup>25</sup> The Jewish ceremony of circumcision has value only if you obey God's law. But if you don't obey God's law, you are no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. <sup>26</sup> And if the Gentiles obey God's law, won't God declare them to be his own people? <sup>27</sup> In fact, uncircumcised Gentiles who keep God's law will condemn you Jews who are circumcised and possess God's law but don't obey it. <sup>28</sup> For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. <sup>29</sup> No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise<sup>[a]</sup> from God, not from people.

It is clear from this passage in the book of Romans that physical circumcision is only an outward sign of being one of God's people.

God is interested in the circumcision of the heart. In other words God is looking for a deep personal relationship with Himself.

So the application to us here today at Osaka International Church is this.

We may show all the outward signs of being a Christian, but our heart may be a long way from a deep and personal intimate relationship with God.

We may attend Church, pray and even read our Bibles without having a deep personal relationship with God. Thousands of people all over the world give an outward showing that they are a Christian, but they do not have a personal relationship with God.

Some of these people would like to have a personal relationship with God and others are happy to use God for their own ends. They pray to Him when they have problems and they come to Him when they need help. However most of the time God is not involved in their daily life.

The question I need to ask you this morning is "Do YOU WANT to have a deep and personal relationship with God or not?"

If you do then I can help you, if you don't then I can't help you.

Let me assume that there is one person here this morning that sincerely does want to have a deep and personal relationship with God. What advice can I give you today?

Firstly you need to recognize that before God you have a sinful heart. Romans 3: v. 23 tells us that we have ALL sinned and come short of the glory of God. However nice you are as a person, you come short of God's perfection which is 100% Holiness. Your sin is separating you from a personal relationship with this Holy God.

Secondly you need to believe that God loves you so much that He has provided a way that your sin can be forgiven and a way that you can enter into a personal relationship with your creator God. The God of the Bible. Our sin was so serious in God's eyes that He sent His one and only Son Jesus Christ into this world. He came for the sole purpose of reconciliation. Reconciliation is bringing people back into a right relationship with their creator. The only way that God could do this by coming into to this world in the form of a human being, and to die and take the punishment for our sin.

Quote 2 Corinthians 5: v. 21 (New Living Translation)

<sup>21</sup> For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin,<sup>[a]</sup> so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

Thirdly there must be a decision in your heart to turn away from sinful things and be willing to follow the teaching of the Bible. The Bible calls this repentance. It literally means going in another direction.

You need to promise, with God's help, to follow Jesus all the days of your life.

If you are sincere about wanting to become a Christian, then God is sincere about wanting to give you a new heart and a new desire in your heart to follow him.

When God spoke through Jeremiah the prophet about the Jewish nation who had fallen away from following Him, he said these words.

Quote Jeremiah 24: v. 6-7 (N.K.J.)

<sup>6</sup> For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull *them* down, and I will plant them and not pluck *them* up. <sup>7</sup> Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I *am* the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

If you are really interested in a personal relationship with your creator God, then God is really interested in changing your heart.

Don't harden your heart towards God, come to Him, cry for His help to save you and bring you into His Kingdom. God is the God who SEES and He know your heart.