



Study # 19

Genesis Chapter 17

Summary of the passage: Thirteen years passed without a record of God appearing to Abram. God's first words to Abram may be considered a rebuke for failing to walk before God in obedience. The expediency of seeking a child through Hagar, was a great setback to Abram enjoying the fulfilment of God's His promise to have a son by Sarai. In this chapter, God renewed the covenant to give Abraham a son, and future nations out of his offspring (v6). He also promised Abram, "all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession" (v8).

For the first time, God introduced the covenant sign and seal of circumcision for all males born to Abraham, and for all male servants within his house.

God changed Abram and Sarai's names to reflect the reality of their many future offspring. God commanded Ishmael to be circumcised and gave promises that the offspring to be born of Ishmael would become a "great nation."

Key verse: "And Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect." Chapter 17:1

After thirteen years of waiting and waiting, Abram received a new revelation of Himself. The divine name, Almighty God, is a compound name taken from two Hebrew names for God, "EL" and "SHADDAI". It means irresistible, and all-powerful to perform. A reference to God's ability and purpose to fulfil the covenant He had given Abram and Sarah regarding the birth of a son in their old age.

Observations on this chapter:

1. God is able to fulfil His covenant promises.

God put His name behind his former covenant promising Abram and Sarai a son. The name "El-Shaddai" translated in our English Bible "the Almighty God", was held forth to Abram to reassure him that God was able to perform what He had promised. This name appears six times in Genesis – Ch. 17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 48:3, 49:25. It appears 31 times in the book of Job.

The direct statement in verse 2, "I will make my covenant," referred back to the promise given in chapter 15. It was not a new covenant, but it was to reassure Abram that it would yet be fulfilled.

Thirteen years had gone by from the birth of Ishmael, who had been born to Abram by Hagar. They were wasted years, for God remained silent to Abram throughout that time. By resorting to the expediciencies of the flesh Abram lost sight of the promise, for he lost sight of the God behind the promise.

God's command to Abram, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect" (v1), was a rebuke to his fleshly conduct. The word, "perfect" may be translated blameless or upright. Abram had failed in that regard and was called to a new walk before God, to live as in God's sight at all times.

By stating, "As for me, behold my covenant is with thee..." (v4). God further confirmed to Abram that He had not changed his purposes, nor withdrawn His promise to make Abram a father of many nations.

Abram's response is commendable. By falling on his face (v3) he showed his submission to God's promises and his readiness to trust and obey God. This became a new beginning in the life of Abram. Wasted years were to turn to fruitfulness.

How does this apply to me? Every Christian has walked in Abram's shoes to some degree. During periods of disobedience to the revealed will of God we also find that God is silent to us. But God will somehow get our attention, and then we must listen so we may obey. We must repent of wasted years and we must pray for a new walk under the watchful eye of our God.

2. After restoration and God's confirmation of His unchanging covenant with Abram, God changed Abram and Sarai's names.

God gave Abram the new name, Abraham. The additional suffix "HAM" means multitude and by compounding Abram with "ham", Abraham was designated, "the father of a multitude."

Sarai's name was likewise changed to Sarah, meaning "princess" to reflect her as the mother of nations (v15-16). By adopting these names, they showed their faith in God's purposes. They accepted God's word and promises. The "I wills" of God became anchors for their faith. See the repeated times God said, "I will," in v6 - 8. The new names Abraham and Sarah adopted declared them to be in full co-operation with God's will. Their lives bore witness to the power of God at work in them.

How does this apply to me? When believers bear the name Christian, they are twinning their lives with the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. A Christian is a Christ-one. One who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ to fulfil all the covenant promises of the gospel. By taking His name, born-again Christians declare their faith and desire to be living witnesses for Him. Are you doing that?

3. God informed Abraham that circumcision would be the sign to set apart all His covenant people.

God clarified that circumcision would be "a token of the covenant" (v11) between God and Abram with all his descendants. It was to be the symbol, or sign, that set God's covenant people apart. It was mandatory as the uncircumcised were to be cast out (v14). This was the sign of all people within national Israel and continued through to the days of Christ.

Note that circumcision was received by Abraham fourteen years after he was declared righteous through faith in God's first promise, "So shall thy seed be" (Gen. 15:5-6). He was 99 years old when he was circumcised (v24). He was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. The apostle Paul makes the argument for salvation by faith alone on the premise that Abraham was justified before God while he was uncircumcised (Rom. 4:9 - 17).

Circumcision was, then, a national identity. Some claim that it was health related. It was certainly personal, and when practiced in Hebrew families it demonstrated parental duty. Albert Barnes stated:

"It is worthy of remark that in circumcision, after Abraham himself, the parent is the voluntary imponent [*one who imposes*], and the child merely the passive recipient of the sign of the covenant. Hereby is taught the lesson of parental responsibility and parental hope. This is the first formal step in a godly education, in which the parent acknowledges his obligation to perform all the rest. It is also, on the command of God, the formal admission of the believing parents' offspring into the privileges of the covenant, and therefore cheers the heart of the parent in entering upon the parental task. This admission cannot be reversed but by the deliberate rebellion of the child."

In the New Testament, circumcision was not a gospel requirement. Heated controversy raged between Christian Jews and Gentiles in the church over the supposed requirement to circumcise. Some false teachers insisted that without circumcision no one could be saved. They made salvation to be faith in Christ plus circumcision. So endemic was the problem that it was debated at the Jerusalem council by the apostles and elders (Acts 15). The council affirmed that circumcision was not required in the New Testament Christian church. The apostle Paul stood his ground for the same position when he wrote the book of Galatians. He concluded that to insist on circumcision for salvation denied the grace of God (Galatians 4:1-12).

How does this apply to me? One of the most challenging issues in the Christian church is to know if God replaced circumcision with infant baptism. If it were the case, we would expect to find clear statements upon that conclusion in such passages as Acts 15, Romans 4, or Galatians 4. In none of the scripture passages where circumcision is renounced is baptism offered as an alternative. This is an argument from silence, and many think it inconclusive. There are other passages in the N.T. which paedo-Baptists appeal to, such as Colossians 2:11-12. The reference to "circumcision" in that text is argued to be either spiritual baptism, "the circumcision made without hands," or water baptism. All Christians will agree on the necessity of the circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:29).

Things to do in light of this study:

- Use a concordance to study the context of passages where the divine name "El-Shaddai" appears.
- How was the name El-Shaddai applicable to Abram and Sarai's situation, while Sarah was childless?
- Make sure you live up to the name of Christian, as you witness for Him before the ungodly.
- Take a first step to live up to your family duty to teach and train your children in the ways of the Lord.