

“Believe it or Not!” (Genesis 17:1-27)

“Jump and I’ll catch you.” Have you ever heard a parent say that to a child perched on some high place? Can you remember one of your parents saying that to you when you were little? Did you do it? Did you jump? In a sense, that is like something that God says to us. God reaches out to us in love. He initiates a relationship with us by making some promises to us. When we believe His promise of eternal life through Christ, we begin a relationship with God. Yet, this is only the beginning. God calls us to trust His promises and dare to live our lives as if we believe He will keep all of His promises. There is some risk involved in doing that. But unless we take that risk, we can never truly live the life of faith that God intends for us. God says, “Jump and I’ll catch you.”¹

Yet, there is a tension in this. While we are commanded to obey, Jesus works in us, through the Holy Spirit, to accomplish obedience. When Mother Teresa was asked about her world-renowned service, she replied, “I am just a little pencil in God’s hands...doing something beautiful for God.”² In a mysterious way, we’re not called to work for God, but to let God work through us.

In Genesis 17:1-27, we will see a mixture of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. And we will learn how God works to accomplish obedience in Abram’s life and ours. First, we will see...

1. God is a covenant-keeping God (17:1-8). Moses writes, “**Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty’**” (17:1a). These words break thirteen years of silence between God and Abram. God had not spoken to Abram since he took matters into his own hands by sleeping with Hagar and conceiving a son (16:16). After these silent years, Abram must have been greatly encouraged by this encounter with God.³ In this revelation, the Lord manifested Himself more fully in terms of His character and attributes. God referred to Himself as “**God Almighty**” (*El Shaddai*).⁴ So far, the primary name by which the Lord has revealed Himself is *Elohim*, meaning the God who creates and sustains nature. *El Shaddai*, on the other hand, refers to the God who constrains nature, the One who actually causes nature to do what is against itself. In other words, God is capable of working miracles. He created natural laws; He can violate natural laws.

El Shaddai is a designation, which emphasizes God’s infinite power (Exod 6:3).⁵ Interestingly, the word *El* means “the strong one,” while the word *Shadd* refers to the bosom of a nursing mother. This suggests that God is the One from whom Abram was to draw strength and nourishment. By a most tender image, God seems to be saying that we are empowered to live out our responsibilities in the covenant by feeding on Him, just as a child grows by feeding on the milk of its mother.⁶

This is a timely word. Abram had spent the last thirteen years living with the strife and turmoil that his sinful decision had produced in Ishmael. Now Abram was about to learn that God’s promises are fulfilled not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord Almighty (Zech 4:6). It would be *El Shaddai* who would accomplish His will in Abram’s life! God is able, whatever the circumstance and whatever the difficulty (Eph 3:20). Do you believe this? Is there anything too difficult for God to accomplish in your life? Can He restore your marriage? Can He transform your wayward child? Can He redeem your job? If He truly is a supernatural God, then He can. Will you put your trust in Him to work in your life?

This almighty God says to Abram, “**Walk before Me, and be blameless**” (17:1b). As Enoch and Noah had walked with God (5:21-24; 6:9) so now Abram is commanded to “walk before God.” He is not commanded to jog, run, or make a mad dash,⁷ he is commanded to walk.

A few months ago, I shared with you about a severe planter's wart I have had on the ball of my right foot. For the past six years, Lori and I have tried to remove this wart. Despite all the elaborate treatments, we have been unsuccessful. So this year, I went to a podiatrist. After two attempts to freeze it off, he too was foiled. Recently, I completed two weeks of classes at Talbot School of Theology on the campus of Biola University. During my stay I did not rent a car so I walked everywhere I went. I logged many miles (something that I'm not accustomed to). And guess what? My wart fell off! Talk about a shock! The war of the wart was won by walking. Many people fail to recognize how simple and straightforward the Christian life is: It requires a slow and steady walk with God; not 30 days to spiritual victory if you read this book or watch these DVD's. God esteems the patient perseverance of walking before Him.

God also states that Abram is to **"be blameless."**⁸ The word **"blameless"** means "complete, whole, having integrity." Abram was to conduct himself as if always being in God's presence.⁹ What a challenge for Abram and for us. It is easy to be blameless on Sunday morning but it is far more difficult to live a blameless life Monday through Saturday. I love the book title by Bill Hybels, *Who You are When No One's Looking*.¹⁰ God wants His disciples to be people of integrity, not duplicity.

The Lord continues in 17:2: **"I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly."**¹¹ Two times in this verse, God says, **"I will..."** The promises of this covenant are from God (cf. 15:18). He takes the initiative.¹² The word translated **"establish"** means "to set in motion."¹³ At this time, the Lord is going to begin to fulfill His promises to Abram. The word **"covenant"** (*berith*) is central to this narrative. The phrase **"My covenant"** occurs nine times.¹⁴ The word **"covenant"** appears another four times.¹⁵ The use of the word **"everlasting"** captures God's firm resolution to establish a people through Abram.¹⁶ What an encouragement this must have been to Abram. In spite of his rendezvous with Hagar (16:3-4), God was going to honor His covenant with him. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful (2 Tim 2:13). Regardless of what you have done, God wants to extend His grace to you. Have you sinned against God? Have you failed Him in your marriage vows, in your relationship with your children, in your work performance? Today, He says to you: Return to Me, I want to restore you. I want to bless you.

Upon hearing these words, **"Abram fell on his face,¹⁷ and God talked with him"** (17:3). Abram responds demonstratively. Why? He met with God! In the Bible, when men and women meet with God, there is some form of physical expression. It was not a "ho-hum" yawn of an experience. Typically, our posture reflects the attitude of our heart. It is very difficult to worship God without being expressive. The idea of worshipping God within one's heart is a western phenomenon that is not practiced by the rest of the world and will not be in the eternal state (Rev 4-5). When you meet with God, I encourage you to express yourself to Him. If you are not comfortable doing so publicly, do so privately.

In 17:4-5, the Lord says, **"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations."** Abram is to be the father of other nations besides Israel.¹⁸ **"Nations"** is a key word that is repeated three times in 17:4-6. This serves as a reminder that God's program includes all people: "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation" (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

In these verses, God also changes Abram's name. **"Abram"** means "exalted father."¹⁹ Now God changes Abram's name to **"Abraham,"** which means "father of a multitude." How could Abraham ever live this name down? Every time his name is called, it reminds him how hollow the promise sounds.

Now he gets his family together and announces his new name. I can hear one of his servants saying, “You’ve got to be kidding. What a joke! You only have one child and that by a slave. Abram is losing his mind. The desert sun is getting to him.”²⁰

While I was at Talbot, I developed friendships with students from all over the world. Talbot caters to different ethnic groups from all parts of the globe. Ten of the sixteen students in my doctoral cohort were Korean students. I learned that many Korean Christians take on a Christian name (e.g., Daniel, Joseph, Jonathan) once they become Christians. They do so because they recognize that they are new individuals with a new identity. They will never be the same again. They are expressing the same thought that God did when He gave Abram a new name (see Neh 9:7). As believers in Jesus Christ, we have also been given a new name and a new identity. Thus, we seek to live according to who we are.

God’s drama continues, and it is for our benefit that He writes the script. He delights us with an age-old theme of just an ordinary man doing the extraordinary—a simple, humble man chosen to become the father of a great nation. Isn’t it wondrous that God takes insignificant people like you and me and uses us beyond our greatest expectations (Ps 113:5-9; Eph 3:20)?²¹

Notice the first two words of 17:6: **“I will.”** These words occur five times in 17:6-8:

- 1) **“I will make you exceedingly fruitful.”**²² God promises Abraham many descendants. This has been God’s plan from the beginning (e.g., Adam, Noah).
- 2) **“I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.”**²³ Not only would nations come from Abraham but even kings, eventually culminating in Jesus—“the King of Kings.”
- 3) **“I will establish my covenant between Me and you and your descendants.”**²⁴ We worship God individually, but we also want to have a legacy of unbroken family members trusting in Christ.
- 4) **“I will give you and your descendants the land as an everlasting possession.”**²⁵ God will give not only descendants, but land as well.
- 5) **“I will be their God.”**²⁶ This last phrase is significant. God wants to be our God. He wants our relationship with Him to change our lives! This makes sense when you think about it. After all, you wouldn’t expect to get married without it modifying your life at all. Imagine someone saying, “Oh yes, I’m married, but I don’t let it affect my life. I do what I want with my money and my time. No, I don’t spend time with my wife. Yes, I talk with her occasionally, but only when I really need something from her.” You would think that was a pretty strange way to behave; yet people think that they can behave that way with God.²⁷

[God is a covenant-keeping God, but we will also see that...]

2. God expects our obedience (17:9-27). “God said further to Abraham, ‘Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old²⁸ shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting²⁹ covenant.’” Many people wrestle with the nature of this unconditional covenant. The question that is raised is: If this covenant depends upon God, why are conditions placed upon Abram? The answer is simple: Although God’s promises to Abram were

unconditional Abram's enjoyment of the blessings was conditional. In other words, within God's unconditional promises, God makes demands.

He commanded Abram and Sarai to leave their home and their extended family and go to a new land (12:1). He commanded them to be a blessing to others (12:2), to walk before Him and be blameless (17:1), and to circumcise the males in their household as a sign of the covenant (17:10). Although God's promises were unconditional, Abram's temporal participation in God's blessing was conditioned on his faithfulness and obedience to God's commands.

When God says, "You shall," He is not saying "My will is dependent upon your action. God does not say, "You must do this, and if you don't, I won't do what I've promised." God does not act like that. God is sovereign. God is going to do what He will do. But it is no less true and no less important that we must do something.³⁰ In the case of Abraham, he was to circumcise himself and every male in his household. The word circumcision means "cutting around." It refers to a minor operation that removes the foreskin from the male organ. Only males underwent circumcision, of course. In the patriarchal society of the ancient Near East people considered that a girl or woman shared the condition of her father if she was single, or her husband if she was married. Circumcision was a fitting symbol for at least three reasons.³¹

- 1) ***It would have been a frequent reminder to every circumcised male of God's promises involving seed.*** Circumcision of the male only may have signified the special responsibility, which God had assigned to the father. (This may have had particular significance to Abraham after the incident with Hagar.) God will bring about His seed in His time and in His way.
- 2) ***It was a physical reminder of sexual and spiritual fidelity.*** The male organ of procreation was to be set apart for the Lord's purposes rather than for sexual immortality. Abram had committed sexual immortality by sleeping with Hagar. Now he was to submit it to God. The male organ of procreation would be the vehicle through which the seed of man would pass, ultimately preparing the way for the Messiah. This sign alerted a member of the covenant never to use the organ bearing this mark in a promiscuous manner. If this part of man's body is devoted to the Lord, the entire man will be devoted to the Lord. All manners of sexual sin come from this organ. This organ is to be used for sexual pleasure in the context of marriage and godly offspring. Circumcision assured a wife of her husband's submission to the Lord. It reminded a husband that he belonged to the Lord. No Israelite man could ever engage in sexual relations without being reminded of the fact that he belonged to God.
- 3) ***It was an illustration of God's approach to dealing with the flesh*** (Col 2:10-12). The circumcised male was one who repudiated "the flesh" (i.e., the simply physical and natural aspects of life) in favor of trust in the Lord and His spiritual promises. Circumcision didn't save Abram or make him righteous before God (Rom 4:9-12). His righteous standing before God was on the basis of faith (11:30-31). Circumcision, water baptism,³² confirmation classes, communion, being born into a Christian home, being a part of a certain denomination, or even saying the sinners prayer are outward symbols of an inward faith. But apart from a changed heart and life, these religious symbols have nothing to do with salvation.³³

In the New Testament, the physical act of circumcision is no longer required for believers.³⁴ Instead, we are to be circumcised in our hearts,³⁵ which is the seat of decision-making. This expresses three things:

- 1) It is an expression of our identification with Christ.
- 2) It is an expression of spiritual fidelity to the Lord.
- 3) It is an expression of cutting off or putting to death the sinful nature (Phil 3:3). We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but rely totally upon Him. That is the circumcised life.

This paragraph concludes in 17:14 with this warning: **“But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”** Here is a classic play-on-words. God is saying, “If you don’t cut yourself, I’ll cut you off.”³⁶ This is a reference to execution, sometimes by the Israelites but usually by God, in premature death.³⁷ The person who refused to participate in circumcision demonstrated his lack of faith in God by his refusal. Thus he broke the covenant of circumcision. Only by keeping these conditions can man enjoy the blessings of God as guaranteed in the covenant.³⁸

In 17:15-16, God transitions in his discussion with Abraham. He says, **“As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”** For emphasis Sarah’s name appears three times in these two verses. God is a God of grace. Sarah had been immoral. She asked her husband to commit adultery and polygamy. But God still blesses her. The names are two different forms of a word meaning “princess.” It is as though God is saying, “Now Sarah will really be a princess!”³⁹ The Lord, possibly testing Abraham’s faith and his reliance on Him for help, did not specifically indicate that Sarah would be the mother. Abram undoubtedly assumed that Ishmael would be the promised heir until God told him that Sarah would bear his heir herself. That revelation is the most important feature of this chapter. God gave the name changes and circumcision to confirm the covenant promise of an heir and to strengthen Abram’s faith.

In 17:17, we read these words: **“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed,⁴⁰ and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah,⁴¹ who is ninety years old, bear a child?’”**⁴² In 17:3, Abram “fell facedown” exhibiting respect and reverence for the Lord. Here in 17:17, he again falls on his face but this time it is to hide his laughter. When Abram heard that God would greatly increase his descendants, he responded with respect and submission. But when he heard *how* God would carry out his plan, his respect contained a tinge of laughter.⁴³

Soren Kierkegaard said, “When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, ‘It is talking to me, and about me.’”⁴⁴ So put yourself in Abraham’s sandals for a moment. He began following God at age 75. He is now 99. He has been following God for 24 years. During these years God has repeatedly told him that he will have a son and he will possess the land. After 24 years, what does Abraham have to show for it? Nothing! He does not have a son nor does he possess the land. He and Sarah keep getting older. If you were 99 and your wife was 90, and God said you are going to have a son you would burst out laughing too! How would you like to be the mother of a two-year-old at 92 years of age? Just think about that for a moment! A two-year-old! How would you like to be 108 when he got out of high school and 112 when he got out of college? No wonder Abraham laughed! He said, “God, you’ve got to be kidding!” It wasn’t a disrespectful or cynical laugh (see Rom 4:18-21). It was a laugh of shock!⁴⁵

Why does God delay in our lives? His opportunity may not even begin until we have exhausted our own resources and all other options. His delay is designed to bring us to the point where we recognize that there is no human hope—our only hope is in God (Rom 4:18-21)!

In 17:18, Abraham said to God, **“Oh that Ishmael might live before You!”** We must feel the agony of this request. All of Abraham’s love, all of his hopes, and all of his dreams have been poured into this boy.⁴⁶ Abraham was not expecting another son. He must have thought: “Lord, be reasonable. After all, Sarah is a very ‘iffy’ proposition whereas Ishmael is a certainty. Let’s go with a sure thing.” Abraham is

seeking to protect God from the embarrassment of not keeping His promise.⁴⁷ Abraham has gotten into the habit of being content with something less than what God intended. Be careful to ever limit God. In 17:19, God said, **“No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.”** God once again confirms His promise, but this time explicitly states that Sarah shall be the mother. God even says that the boy’s name shall be **“Isaac,”** which means “laughter.” God thus made an ironic play on Abraham’s response and his son’s name.⁴⁸ Every time he heard his son’s name, Abraham would be reminded of the miraculous birth.⁴⁹ God always gets the last laugh!

However, God is gracious. He responds to Abraham’s request. He says, **“As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes,⁵⁰ and I will make him a great nation”** (17:20). God heard the prayers of Abram and He blesses Ishmael. As the Hebrew people would have twelve tribes, so Ishmael’s people would also have twelve families. God blesses both believers and unbelievers (Matt 5:45). He is a gracious God—slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.⁵¹ Nevertheless, while sin can be forgiven, the consequences of sin can linger for a lifetime.⁵²

In 17:21-22, the Lord says, **“But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.’ When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.”** For the first time, God gave a specific date for the birth of the promised son. Within a year, Abraham would know whether or not God had fulfilled His promise.

Our story concludes in 17:23-27. Moses writes, **“Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.”** Now I want you to imagine this scenario: A 99-year-old father tells his 13-year-old son⁵³ to go get a flint knife so that all the males in the household can be circumcised. Think about this. Most junior high kids won’t even take out the garbage but somehow Ishmael is willing to be circumcised. Why? I believe that he observed his father’s tendency to obey God and he was willing to follow his father’s example. Fathers, are you that kind of a man? Is your life a model of obedience? Do your children see Christ in you?

Verses 23-27 stress three elements of obedience in our Christian lives.⁵⁴

- 1) ***Biblical obedience is complete.*** Abraham circumcised “every” male in his household. The words **“all”** and **“every”** are used four times in 17:23 and 27.
- 2) ***Biblical obedience is prompt.*** Abraham obeyed God **“the very same day”** (17:23, 26). Abraham did not say, “All right, God, I hear you. I know what You want. I’ll do it tomorrow, or next month, when I have a little more leisure time. I’ll do it after I do something else I want.” Abraham knew that the time to obey God was now.⁵⁵
- 3) ***Biblical obedience can be risky.*** Circumcision is quite painful and disabling (Gen 34). Abraham’s obedience rendered his family defenseless. He trusted God to protect and provide for his family. In order to be true to what I read in the Scripture, I have to take risks.⁵⁶

Again, it is important to note that circumcision was not a condition of the covenant but a sign of participation in it. Likewise, our responses to God are not the conditions of our salvation but are the appropriate and expected signs of our participation in the new covenant.⁵⁷

Why does God delay in our lives? Sometimes God's opportunity does not come until our human extremity is reached. His opportunity to meet our need may not even begin until we have exhausted our own resources and all other options. His delay may be designed to bring us to a point where we recognize that there is no human hope—our only hope is God.⁵⁸

When God says, "Jump," will you trust and obey and take that leap of faith?

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Notes

¹ Jim Killen, “Jump and I’ll Catch You” (Lectionary Starters) Second Sunday in Lent, Year B March 16, 2003: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25. *Preaching Online*.

² Preaching Today Citation: Kitty Muggeridge in Gazing on Truth. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 14.

³ Genesis 17 is one of a small group of narratives in which the author explicitly states that the “LORD appeared” (*wayyera’*) to someone (Gen 12:7; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9). John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic Ed.

⁴ This is the first time God has been called by this name. This title is used exclusively in Scripture of God in relation to His children (God comforted Jacob with this name, Gen 35:10-11; Jacob blessed Joseph with this name, 49:25; and God reassured Moses with this name, Exod 6:3). Psalm 91:1 best characterizes this name of God: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

⁵ Ross writes, “The epithet occurs forty-eight times in the Old Testament, thirty-one of them in Job. In the passages in Genesis (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3), the name occurs with the promise of posterity.” Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002 [1988]), 330.

⁶ See also James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis 12-36 Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1998]), 585.

⁷ Preaching Today Citation: Steven J. Cole, *Leadership*, Vol. 8, no. 4.

⁸ The word translated “blameless” (*tamim*) has the sense of wholeness when used of attitudes and is translated “without blemish” when used in the context of sacrifice (e.g. Exod 12:5; Lev 1:10). *Tamim* is used 49 times in OT. The word only appears one other time in the book of Genesis where Noah’s righteousness is described (cf. 6:9).

⁹ John E. Hartley, *Genesis*: NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 2000), 170.

¹⁰ Bill Hybels, *Who You are When No One’s Looking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987).

¹¹ Lit. “I will multiply you exceedingly, exceedingly.” The repetition is emphatic.

¹² Sailhamer remarks, “Had not God already ‘made’ (*karath*) a covenant with Abraham in 15:18? Why did he establish a covenant with Abram a second time? Several solutions to this problem have been proposed. The simplest answer lies in seeing the two covenants as, in fact, two distinct aspects of God’s covenant with Abraham—the one stressing the promise of the land (15:18-21) and the other stressing the promise of a great abundance of descendants (17:2).” Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic Ed.

¹³ The verb *nathan* (“establish”) is not really a future tense in Hebrew. The covenant had already been established; here God is restating it to Abram.

¹⁴ See Gen 17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, and 21.

¹⁵ See Gen 17:7, 11, 13, and 19.

¹⁶ The word “everlasting” (*olam*) occurs three times with covenant (Gen 17:7, 13, 19) and once with possession (17:8). Hartley, *Genesis*, 169.

¹⁷ This is a typical act of worship (Lev 9:24; Josh 5:14; Ezek 1:28).

¹⁸ See the genealogies of Keturah (Gen 25:1-4), Ishmael (25:12-18), and Esau (36:1-43).

¹⁹ This name did not refer to Abram himself but to God. See Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 169. Others suggest that this name referred to Terah, Abram’s father.

²⁰ Ed Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 102.

²¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Abraham: The Friend of God* (Fullerton, CA: Insight for Living, 1988), 59.

²² Sailhamer observes, “The choice of the word *be fruitful* in verse 6 and *multiply* in verse 2 seems intended to recall the blessing of all humankind in 1:29: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land,’ and its reiteration in 9:1: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land.’ Thus the covenant with Abraham was the means through which God’s original blessing would again be channeled to all humankind.” John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 157.

²³ Sailhamer writes, “A new element is added in 17:6b: ‘kings will come forth from you.’ This seems to anticipate not only the subsequent history of Abraham’s descendants as it is recorded in the later historical books (e.g., Samuel and Kings); but, more importantly, it provides a link between the general promise of blessing through the seed of Abraham and the author’s subsequent focus of that blessing in the royal house of Judah (Gen 49:8-12; Num 24:7-9). The notion that the blessing would come from a king is not new to the author’s argument (cf. 14:18-19). What is here being developed for the first time, however, is the idea that this king would come from the seed of Abraham. At work here is the same theological planning as that lying behind the structure of the genealogy of Matthew 1: ‘A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.’ Keeping in mind the close association of the

term ‘messiah’ (*christos*) with the kingship elsewhere in biblical literature (e.g., 1 Sam 24:6, 10), it is not too far from the truth to speak of a ‘christology’ of Genesis in such passages.” Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic Ed.

²⁴ Constable suggests, “The references to the ‘covenant’ in this chapter have caused some confusion. The Abrahamic Covenant (ch. 15) is in view (vv. 4, 7, 11, 19, 21) but also the outward sign of that covenant that was the covenant of circumcision (vv. 2, 9, 10, 13, 14). Thus Moses used the word ‘covenant’ with two different references here.

Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional, the covenant of circumcision depended on Abram’s obedience (vv. 1-2). God would bless Abram as Abram obeyed God by circumcising his household. This blessing would be in the form of multiplying Abram’s descendants ‘exceedingly,’ even more than God had already promised.” Dr.

Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 147.

²⁵ The Hebrew word for “descendants” or “seed” (*zerach*) is a collective noun and may be singular or plural depending on the context. The context here suggests the noun is plural referring to Israel as the seed of Abraham. The Apostle Paul’s argument of Gal 3:16 concerning the seed (singular) is based on Gen 23:12 where the context demands this same word be understood as singular. The land of Abraham’s sojournings is the eternal possession of his descendants, the nation of Israel. Elmer Towns, *History Makers of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 109.

²⁶ This statement became a prominent and characteristic phrase in covenant contexts (Jer 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 34:30; Hos 2:23; Zech 8:8). Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis*, 169.

²⁷ Ian M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1999), 78.

²⁸ Why the eighth day? The eighth day was the day when an infant’s immune system is at the optimum level for such a procedure. Important blood-clotting agents, vitamin K and prothrombin, are at their highest levels in infants on precisely the eighth day of life, making the eighth day the safest, earliest day to circumcise an infant. Sailhamer writes, “It is also interesting to note that the number eight is the number of resurrection, and new life, or new things in Scripture. Though Jews held the Sabbath or seventh day as holy, it was always the eighth day that the greatest of Jewish festivals were celebrated. The Feast of Firstfruits, the Day of Pentecost, the climax to the Feast of Tabernacles, and the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread all fell on the eight day, Sunday. These were the greatest of feasts in the OT and had typical significance concerning the relationship between Christ and believers today. In keeping with the significance of the eight day of Israel’s festive calendar, circumcision was also commanded on the eight day.” Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic ed. Waltke sees the eighth day as symbolic of completing a cycle of time corresponding to the Creation. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 257.

²⁹ Waltke writes, “The Hebrew *olam*, translated ‘everlasting,’ means ‘the most distant time,’ a relative concept according to a text’s horizon (cf. Ex 12:14; 27:21; Lev 3:17; Num 10:8; Deut. 15:17). As long as God administered his nation by their physical lineage from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the sign of physical circumcision endured.” Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 261.

³⁰ Boice, *Genesis 12-36*, 582.

³¹ Additionally, circumcision resulted in greater cleanliness of life and freedom from the effects of sin (i.e., disease and death). Circumcision is the only act of surgery of its kind that is beneficial to mankind. Constable, *Notes on Genesis*, 149.

³² Some have emphasized the similarities between baptism and circumcision and surely there are some (cf. Col 2:10-12). Both signify a union with God that has already occurred. Both necessitate the putting away of former things and living a life pleasing to God (cf. Rom 6:1-4; Col 3:1-11). But there are rather obvious differences, which must be kept in mind. Circumcision was performed on infants eight days old and evidenced the faith of the parents. Baptism is for believing adults, as an indication of their faith in God (Acts 16:33; 19:1-7). Baptism was a public sign; circumcision was a private sign. Baptism is for all believers; male and female, circumcision was only for the males. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant with Abraham; baptism is not the sign of the New Covenant but the Lord’s Supper (cf. Luke 22:20). While some use Acts 16 to proof-text infant baptism, this cannot be done. All who were of the jailor’s household heard the Gospel (16:32); all believed (16:34); all were baptized (16:33), and all rejoiced (16:34). All who were baptized were themselves believers, just as was the jailor.

³³ Circumcision was an outward sign of an inward commitment. It was to a Jew what a wedding ring is to a marriage. Circumcision was of great value and significance if a Jew understood and lived out its intended significance. But, if its genuine meaning was disregarded, it was as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer’s finger.

³⁴ See Rom 2:28-29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15; Col 2:11; 3:11; esp. Phil 3:3.

³⁵ See Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26; Gal 5:6; 6:12.

³⁶ See also this comment by Hamilton, “This expression undoubtedly involves a word play on *cut*. He that is not himself cut (i.e., circumcised) will be cut off (i.e., ostracized). Here is the choice: be cut or be cut off.” Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 473.

³⁷ Waltke agrees, “God will sever the disloyal descendant from the covenant community and from its benefits of blessing and life. The disloyal is doomed to extinction and is liable to premature death.” Waltke, *Genesis*, 261.

³⁸ There is a clearly defined outline of the obligations of this covenant. In Gen 17:4, God said, “As for Me.” In 17:9, He said, “As for you.” In 17:15, we read, “As for Sarai.” Finally, in 17:20, we find, “As for Ishmael,” God’s covenant is eternal and sure. The enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant is conditional.

³⁹ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 83.

⁴⁰ Sailhamer writes, “Throughout the remainder of the narratives surrounding the birth of Isaac (*yishaq*), a key word within each major section is ‘laughter’ (*sahaq*). Sarah ‘laughed’ (*wattishaq* 18:12); Lot’s sons-in-law laughed (*kimsaheq* 19:14; NIV, ‘[thought he was] joking’); all who heard of Sarah’s birth to Isaac would ‘laugh’ (*yishaq* 21:6); the son of Hagar laughed (*mesaheq* 21:9b; NIV, ‘was mocking’) at Isaac. Finally, Isaac’s own failure to trust in God (26:7) was uncovered when the Philistine king saw him ‘laughing’ (*mesaheq* 26:8b; NIV, ‘caressing’) with Rebekah.”

⁴¹ It is important to note that even though Abraham staggers at the announcement of the birth of a son, finding it almost too incredible; he nonetheless calls his wife Sarah, the new name given to remind him of the promise of God. See NET Bible Notes.

⁴² Sailhamer writes, “The absence of such a rebuke of Abraham’s laughter here in chapter 17 suggests that his laughter does not so much reflect a total lack of faith as it does a limitation of his faith in what God must do to fulfill his promise. Abraham is not depicted here as one whose faith in God has reached full maturity; rather he is one whose faith must still be pushed beyond its present limits. His faith must grow if he is to continue to put his trust in God’s promise.” Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Electronic ed.

⁴³ Some have tried to explain the difference between the two laughters as arising from two different states of mind: Abraham’s from a state of surprise and ecstasy; Sarah’s from a state of unbelief. But the text will not let Abraham off that easily. There is no reason to connect Abraham’s laughter with that of Psalm 126:2 (when the Lord brought back the captives from Babylon, “our mouths were filled with laughter”) or even that of Job 8:21 (“he will yet fill your mouth with laughter”). Both the Jerusalem Targum and Calvin were too hasty in getting Abraham off the hook here by equating his laughter with joyous amazement. Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed. Waltke comments, “Abraham again stumbles in incredulity after the covenant has been given (cf. 12:10-20).” Waltke, *Genesis*, 262.

⁴⁴ Preaching Today Citation: Soren Kierkegaard, *Leadership*, Vol. 2, no. 4.

⁴⁵ Dobson, *Abraham*, 104.

⁴⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 451.

⁴⁷ Hartley, *Genesis*, 173.

⁴⁸ Further puns on Isaac’s name appear in Gen 18:12-15 and 21:6.

⁴⁹ Hartley, *Genesis*, 174.

⁵⁰ The list of these twelve rulers is given in Gen 25:13-15.

⁵¹ See Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Jonah 4:2; and Nah 1:3.

⁵² Does the rejection of Eliezer of Damascus (15:2-4) mean that God does not consider adopted children to be as important as birth-children? No, because Jesus Himself technically was the “adopted” child of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Does the rejection of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, an Egyptian woman, mean that God does not value mixed-race individuals as highly as he does “pure-race” children? No, because the Messiah Himself, Jesus Christ, had non-Hebrew blood and thus was of a “mixed-race” heritage (one of His ancestors was Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute of the city of Jericho, and another of His ancestors was Ruth, a Moabitess—a race of people greatly despised by the ancient Hebrews). So if you are an adopted son or daughter or a mixed-race individual, be of good cheer, you share some commonalities with Jesus. You are valuable and precious to Him. Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

⁵³ To this day, Ishmael’s Arab descendants still circumcise their sons at age thirteen.

⁵⁴ Deffinbaugh writes, “While there was a time lapse of 13 years from the birth of Ishmael to this appearance of God, there was only about three months from the circumcision of Abraham to the birth of Isaac.” Robert Deffinbaugh, *Genesis: From Paradise to Patriarchs*. Lesson 18: Grasping the Great Truth of God Genesis 17:1-27 (www.bible.org, 1997), 4.

⁵⁵ Boice, *Genesis 12-36*, 587.

⁵⁶ Preaching Today Citation: Don Bubna, *Leadership*, Vol. 6, no. 2.

⁵⁷ Walton, *Genesis*, 469.

⁵⁸ Dobson, *Abraham*, 107.