

# The God Who Marks His Covenant People

## Genesis 17:1-27

### Teacher's Guide

## Introduction: A Promise You Can Feel

In the summer of 1776, the Continental Congress voted to approve the Declaration of Independence. The decision was bold. The language was costly. And the commitment it required would reshape the lives of every man who supported it. The words were set on paper, but the signatures that made them binding did not all happen in a single moment. Most delegates added their names weeks later when the official parchment copy was ready. Others signed as they could travel back to Philadelphia. Some knew each other. Some never met. But every signature carried the same weight. Each name placed on that document became a visible mark of allegiance to the cause. The signing did not create independence, but it sealed their commitment to it. Whenever those men saw their names, they remembered the promise they had made and the cost they were willing to bear.

History reminds us that promises grow stronger when they carry a mark we can see or touch. Whether it is a signature, a seal, or a symbol, the sign helps anchor the heart to the commitment. It turns something spoken into something remembered. It becomes a reminder that a promise has been made and that the one who made it intends to keep it.

Genesis 17 is a moment like that for Abram. God had already entered into covenant with him in Genesis 12 and confirmed it in Genesis 15. Abram had heard God's promises. He had received God's oath. But now the Lord deepens the covenant relationship. He reveals Himself with a new name. He calls Abram to walk before Him with wholehearted devotion. And He gives Abram a sign he can feel. Circumcision becomes the physical mark of the covenant, the reminder that Abram and his descendants belong to the God who keeps His word. The sign does not create the promise. God already established it. But it seals His commitment and marks His people as those who trust Him.

This chapter shows us a God who not only speaks promises but seals them. A God who shapes identity, transforms names, and invites His people into deeper obedience. A God

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who remains faithful even when His people struggle to believe. Genesis 17 teaches us that God’s promises are not fragile or uncertain. They are secured by His character, confirmed by His faithfulness, and marked upon His people by His grace.

## Opening Question

Just as the signatures on the Declaration served as visible reminders of a commitment that had already been made, God often gives His people tangible signs that help steady their faith. When has the Lord given you something you could see, hold, or remember that strengthened your trust in His promises during a season of waiting?

### Possible Answers:

- A verse of Scripture that became an anchor in a difficult season
- A prayer God answered in a specific and unexpected way
- A provision from God that arrived at the exact moment of need
- A person whose words or presence reminded me of God’s care
- A moment or experience that confirmed God’s hand in my circumstances

## I. God Calls Abram to Walk Before Him and Be Blameless (vv. 1–8)

### What’s Going On Here?

#### 1) God Reveals Himself as God Almighty (v. 1)

***“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,”***

Abram is ninety-nine years old when God appears to him again. Nearly twenty-four years have passed since God first called him out of Ur. Abram has walked through seasons of obedience and seasons of doubt. He has seen God protect him in Egypt, rescue Lot, and make a covenant with him under the stars. But Sarai remains barren. The promised son has not yet arrived. Into this long stretch of waiting, God speaks with a name that anchors Abram’s heart. “I am God Almighty.” The Hebrew name El Shaddai communicates that God possesses power beyond human limitation. He is the God who can bring life from a barren womb and strength from frailty. He is the God who sustains, provides, and overcomes every obstacle that stands in the way of His promise. Abram’s faith does not

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depend on his age or Sarai's condition. It depends on the character of the God who reveals Himself as the One who can do what no human can do.

## **2) God Commands Abram to Walk Before Him and Be Blameless (v. 1)**

With the revelation of His name comes a call. "Walk before Me and be blameless." This is not a call to perfection but to wholehearted devotion. To walk before God means to live life openly before His eyes, shaped by His presence and guided by His word. Blamelessness speaks of integrity, loyalty, and covenant faithfulness. God's promise is rooted in grace, yet grace always calls God's people toward holiness. Abram is not being asked to earn the covenant. He is being called to reflect the God who made the covenant. Throughout Scripture, whenever God enters into covenant with His people, He also calls them to obedience. Israel is rescued from Egypt before the law is given. Jesus forgives sinners before He says, "Follow Me." Abram is being shaped not only to receive a promise but to live in a way that honors the God who gave it.

## **3) God Reaffirms His Covenant and Enlarges the Promise (vv. 2–4)**

***<sup>2</sup>that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.*** <sup>3</sup>  
***Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup>"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.***

God repeats and expands what He has already spoken. Abram will be multiplied. Nations will come from him. Kings will descend from his line. The land will be an everlasting possession for his offspring. God promises not only a son but a dynasty. Not only descendants but nations. Not only a homeland but an eternal inheritance. The covenant God makes with Abram is everlasting because it rests on God's sovereign purpose. Abram's doubts have not canceled it. Sarai's barrenness has not weakened it. Hagar's situation has not confused it. God's promises do not rise and fall with human frailty. They stand because God Himself stands behind them. This reaffirmation strengthens Abram for the next steps of obedience and reveals that God is moving His redemptive plan forward through this family, even when they cannot see how the story will unfold.

## **Discussion Question**

Why is it significant that God calls His people to wholehearted obedience at the same time He reaffirms His promises?

**Possible Answers:**

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- It shows that obedience flows from grace, not from earning God’s favor
- It reminds us that God shapes our character as He fulfills His promises
- It teaches that faith is both trust and submission
- It shows that God cares about who we become as much as what He gives

## **II. God Changes Names to Reflect New Identity and Calling (vv. 5–15)**

### **What’s Going On Here?**

#### **1) Abram Becomes Abraham (vv. 5–6)**

***<sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.***

God begins His covenant reaffirmation by giving Abram a new name. Abram means “exalted father,” a title that reflected dignity but not yet fulfillment. God renames him Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.” This change signals a shift from potential to purpose. Abraham’s new name does not describe his present condition. It describes God’s future work in him. Although he has no son with Sarah at this moment, God speaks as though His promise is already accomplished. This is the pattern of God throughout Scripture. He names things according to His will, not according to human sight. In Romans 4, Paul highlights this moment when he describes God as the One who calls into existence the things that do not yet exist. Abraham’s new name becomes a daily reminder that his identity is anchored in God’s promise, not in his weakness. God defines Abraham by the future He guarantees, not the limitations Abraham feels.

#### **2) God Establishes an Everlasting Covenant (vv. 7–8)**

***<sup>7</sup>And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup>And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”***

The covenant God makes is not temporary or fragile. It is everlasting because it is rooted in God’s eternal character. God promises that He will be God to Abraham and to his offspring after him. This is the heart of covenant theology. God does not simply give blessings. He

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gives Himself. The land of Canaan is part of the promise, but the greater gift is the relationship. God binds Himself to His people with a promise that stretches across generations. When God declares that He will be their God, He is giving them the assurance of His presence, protection, and faithfulness. This language echoes throughout Scripture. It becomes the refrain of the prophets. It becomes the foundation of Israel's hope. It becomes the basis for the new covenant in Christ. God's commitment to Abraham is not conditioned on human perfection but on divine faithfulness. His covenant cannot be broken because it rests on the God who does not change.

### **3) Sarai Becomes Sarah and Is Included in the Promise (v. 15)**

***<sup>15</sup> And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name."***

God does not leave Sarah out of the transformation. He changes her name from Sarai, which means "my princess," to Sarah, which means "princess." The shift moves her from being viewed in a personal or limited sense to bearing a royal significance that will extend to nations. Sarah will become the mother of kings and the matriarch of a covenant people. God's promise does not run only through Abraham. It runs through Sarah as well. Scripture consistently elevates her role. Hebrews 11 lists her among the heroes of faith. Peter speaks of her as a model of hope and obedience. God includes Sarah fully, giving her dignity and calling in the unfolding of His plan. Her new name, like Abraham's, is a sign that God is not bound by barrenness, age, or human limitation. He delights in taking what seems unlikely and shaping it into something essential for His redemptive purpose.

### **Discussion Question**

What does it teach us about God that He shapes our identity according to His promise rather than our limitations?

#### **Possible Answers:**

- It shows His power to transform our future
- It reminds us that our identity is rooted in what God says, not in what we see
- It teaches that God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary purposes
- It encourages us to trust His word more than our weaknesses

### III. God Gives Circumcision as the Sign of His Covenant (vv. 9–14)

#### What's Going On Here?

##### 1) Circumcision Becomes the Covenant Sign (vv. 9–11)

***<sup>9</sup>And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup>This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.***

God now gives Abraham a physical sign that will mark His covenant people. Circumcision does not create the covenant. The covenant already rests on God's promise and God's grace. But the sign identifies those who belong to the covenant and distinguishes them from the surrounding nations. The act is permanent and cannot be undone, which reflects the lasting nature of God's promise. It is also deeply personal, touching the very source of Abraham's offspring. The sign reminds God's people that the promise of descendants and blessing rests not on human ingenuity but on divine faithfulness. Circumcision becomes a symbol of consecration. It declares that the people of God are set apart for Him. Their bodies bear a mark of obedience that points to the God who called them.

Throughout Scripture, God often assigns physical signs to remind His people of spiritual realities. The rainbow marked His promise to Noah. The blood on the doorposts marked Israel's protection in Egypt. Later, baptism and the Lord's Supper become signs of the new covenant. God knows that His people are forgetful, so He graciously gives visible reminders that anchor invisible truths. Circumcision functions in that way. It shapes identity. It reinforces commitment. It reminds Abraham and his descendants that they belong to God and that His promises will be fulfilled through them.

##### 2) The Sign Is for Every Male in Abraham's Household (vv. 12–13)

***<sup>12</sup>He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup>both he who is born in your house and he who***

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***is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.***

God makes it clear that this sign is not limited to Abraham's biological sons. Every male in the household is to be circumcised, whether born into the family or purchased from foreigners. This reveals a significant truth about God's covenant community. It is defined by God's command, not by bloodline or ancestry. From the beginning, God's grace extends beyond one family. He welcomes outsiders into His promise. Anyone brought into Abraham's household becomes part of the covenant people and receives the sign of belonging.

This inclusive element foreshadows the global reach of God's redemptive plan. Even before the covenant with Moses and long before the coming of Christ, God is already pulling in those who were once far off. Later Scripture echoes this theme. Ruth the Moabite becomes part of God's people. Rahab the Canaanite becomes part of the Messiah's lineage. The sign of circumcision anticipates the day when faith in Christ will open the covenant to people from every tribe and tongue. God's covenant family is always bigger than human boundaries.

### **3) Refusal to Receive the Sign Is Rebellion (v. 14)**

***<sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."***

The seriousness of the sign becomes clear in verse 14. A male who refuses circumcision is described as breaking God's covenant. The outward sign is tied to an inward reality. To reject the sign is to reject the God who gave it. God uses strong language here because the sign is not optional. It is the appointed way for His people to publicly identify with His promise. Refusing the sign places a person outside the covenant community. This boundary protects the identity, purity, and unity of God's people.

Later Scripture helps clarify the meaning. In Deuteronomy, God calls Israel to circumcise their hearts, showing that the physical act must reflect inner devotion. The prophets rebuke those who bear the outward sign but live in rebellion. In the New Testament, circumcision finds its fulfillment in Christ. Paul explains that the true people of God are those whose hearts have been marked by the Spirit. Obedience to God's signs and instructions has always revealed the state of the heart.

## Discussion Question

Why is it important for God's people to embrace the signs, practices, or disciplines He gives to form and shape their faith?

### Possible Answers:

- God uses physical reminders to strengthen spiritual truth
- Practices like baptism and the Lord's Supper anchor our identity
- Obedience deepens trust and shapes character
- Refusing God's commands reveals a deeper issue in the heart

## IV. God Promises a Son Through Sarah, and Abraham Responds in Faith (vv. 15–27)

### What's Going On Here?

#### 1) God Promises Isaac Through Sarah (vv. 15–19)

***<sup>15</sup> And 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> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." <sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? 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> God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.***

God turns Abraham's attention to Sarah and declares that she will bear the promised son. For decades Abraham assumed that Sarah's barrenness meant God would fulfill His promise through another way. Genesis 16 records the attempt to produce an heir through Hagar, a plan rooted in human reasoning rather than divine timing. But in Genesis 17, God makes it unmistakably clear that the covenant will come through Sarah. He calls her blessed, promises she will be the mother of nations, and names the son she will bear. Isaac means "he laughs," a name that captures the mixture of joy, awe, and holy surprise that fills Abraham's heart. His laughter is not mockery. It is the only natural response when God promises what human ability cannot produce. Isaac's birth will showcase that God

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fulfills His promises by His power alone. He does not choose the easy path or the path of human logic. He chooses the path that magnifies His glory.

This is a recurring theme in Scripture. God repeatedly brings life out of barrenness. Isaac will be followed by Jacob, who comes through Rebekah's barren womb. Samuel will come through Hannah's tears. John the Baptist will come through Elizabeth's old age. The ultimate Son of promise, Jesus Christ, will come through a virgin. God works through human weakness so that His power is unmistakable. By promising Isaac through Sarah, God ensures that Abraham's story will be remembered as a story not of human ingenuity, but of divine grace.

## **2) God Acknowledges Ishmael but Establishes the Covenant Through Isaac (vv. 20–21)**

***<sup>20</sup> As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”***

God does not reject Ishmael. Instead, He promises to bless him, multiply him, and make him into a great nation. This demonstrates God's compassion and His faithfulness to care for those connected to Abraham. But God is clear that Ishmael will not be the covenant heir. The promise will run through Isaac, not because Isaac is superior, but because Isaac is the child of promise. Ishmael was born through human planning. Isaac will be born through divine intervention. This distinction is important in the unfolding story of redemption. God's covenant blessings do not depend on human effort. They flow from His sovereign choice and His faithful power.

The Apostle Paul uses this very passage in Romans 9 and Galatians 4 to teach that God's plan of salvation follows the line of promise, not the line of human striving. Ishmael receives blessing, but Isaac receives the covenant. God is gracious, but He is also precise. Redemption will come through the line He chooses, a line that will eventually lead to Jesus Christ, the promised Son through whom salvation will reach the nations.

## **3) Abraham Obeys Fully and Immediately (vv. 22–27)**

***<sup>22</sup> When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very 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***

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***thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. <sup>27</sup> And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.***

After God finishes speaking, Abraham does not delay. He circumcises himself, Ishmael, and every male in his household that very day. His obedience is immediate, costly, and comprehensive. He does not ask for clarification. He does not negotiate timing. He acts because he trusts. God had given him a covenant that would shape the future. Now Abraham responds with obedience that reflects his faith.

This moment reveals much about Abraham's character. Obedience is always the outward expression of inward faith. Abraham believes God's promise, so he obeys God's command. Scripture consistently presents faith and obedience as inseparable companions. Noah built the ark. Moses confronted Pharaoh. Joshua marched around Jericho. Mary surrendered to the angel's word. The people God uses are the people who respond to His voice with action.

Abraham's obedience also shapes the identity of the covenant community. Every male in the household bears the mark of the covenant. The sign becomes a testimony that Abraham is serious about God's promise and committed to God's authority. His obedience becomes the pattern for Israel's obedience under the law and for the New Testament call to follow Christ in wholehearted devotion. True covenant relationship always produces covenant obedience. Abraham's response shows that faith is not merely believing what God has said. It is submitting to what God commands.

## **Discussion Question**

What does Abraham's immediate obedience teach us about trusting God when His commands are difficult or costly?

### **Possible Answers:**

- Obedience reveals genuine faith
- Trust in God's character produces action, not hesitation
- God blesses those who respond to His word with submission
- Faith must move from belief to obedience

## Living Out God's Grace Today

### **A. Walk Before God With Wholehearted Devotion.**

God called Abraham to walk before Him and be blameless. That call did not demand flawless performance. It called for a heart that belonged fully to God. Wholehearted devotion means living with spiritual integrity. It means letting God's presence shape your daily steps, your private decisions, your hidden motives, and your public actions. When we walk before God, we live with an awareness that our lives are lived in His sight. This kind of walk produces consistency instead of compromise. It grows reverence instead of self-reliance. It cultivates a surrender that says, "Lord, lead me where You want, form in me what You desire, and remove from me what does not belong." The God who called Abraham calls His people today to the same life of steady, humble faithfulness.

### **B. Let God Define Your Identity.**

Abraham and Sarah did not receive new names because they reinvented themselves. They received new names because God was giving them a new future. Their identity shifted from what they were to what God promised to make them. The same truth rests on believers today. Our identity is not built on our past, our failures, or the opinions of others. It is shaped by the voice of the God who declares us forgiven, redeemed, adopted, and loved in Christ. When we allow fear or shame to define us, we forget who God says we are. When we allow culture or comparison to define us, we lose sight of our heavenly calling. Let God speak over your life. Let His word, not your weakness, determine your worth. The God who renamed Abraham and Sarah is still in the business of giving His people identity rooted in His promise.

### **C. Embrace the Signs God Gives to Strengthen Your Faith.**

Circumcision marked Israel as God's covenant people. It was the outward sign of an inward commitment. Today, believers participate in new covenant signs like baptism and the Lord's Supper. These signs do not earn us salvation, but they strengthen our faith by reminding us who we belong to. Baptism declares that we have died with Christ and risen to new life. The Lord's Supper ties our hearts to the cross and the sacrifice that secured our redemption. Daily disciplines such as prayer, Scripture reading, worship, and repentance become spiritual rhythms that anchor our souls in God's grace. These practices are not empty rituals. They are gifts from God that shape our hearts, train our obedience, and keep us rooted in the truth of the gospel.

### **D. Trust God to Fulfill His Promises in His Time.**

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Abraham waited decades for the birth of Isaac. He watched the years pass, watched his own body grow old, and watched Sarah's barrenness remain unchanged. Yet God was not late. He was working within His perfect timetable. Waiting does not mean God is inactive. Waiting means God is preparing. When we find ourselves in seasons where the promise seems distant or delayed, we are invited to learn trust at a deeper level. God's timing teaches us patience, shapes our character, and prevents us from clinging to the illusion that we are in control. His promises are never rushed, but they are never abandoned. The God who fulfilled His word to Abraham will fulfill every word He has spoken to His people today. His timing is perfect. His power is sufficient. His faithfulness does not fail.

#### **E. Obey God Fully, Even When It Costs You.**

Abraham obeyed immediately and completely when God commanded him to circumcise every male in his household. This act was painful, costly, and humbling, yet Abraham responded in faith. His obedience revealed the sincerity of his trust. Scripture consistently teaches that true faith expresses itself in obedience. Noah built the ark. Moses confronted Pharaoh. Joshua marched around Jericho. Mary surrendered to God's plan. Obedience is the pathway where faith becomes visible. It may cost us comfort, convenience, pride, or reputation, but it always leads to deeper relationship with God. When God calls His people to difficult obedience, He also supplies the grace needed to follow. Faith grows when we submit our will to His. Obedience is not a burden God places on His people. It is the means by which He draws us nearer and makes us more like Christ.

### **Conclusion: A Covenant God and a Marked People**

Genesis 17 reveals a God who initiates covenant, shapes identity, seals His promises, and calls His people into wholehearted obedience. Abraham and Sarah stand as examples of those who trusted God despite impossible circumstances. The sign of circumcision marked the people of the covenant, but the heart of the covenant was always God Himself. He is the God who remembers His promises, who gives identity, who calls His people to holiness, and who fulfills every word He speaks. In Christ, the promised descendant of Abraham, God brings His covenant to completion. The God who marked Abraham's family now marks His people with the seal of the Spirit and writes His promises on their hearts. He is faithful. He is near. He is the God who keeps His covenant forever.

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## **Closing Prayer**

Lord, thank You for being the God who speaks promises and the God who keeps them. Teach us to walk before You with wholehearted devotion. Shape our identity according to Your word, not our weakness. Strengthen our faith through the reminders You have given us, and help us obey with humility and trust. Thank You for fulfilling Your covenant through Jesus Christ, the One who brings redemption to people from every tribe and tongue. Anchor our lives to Your faithfulness and keep us steady in Your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.