

STUDY FIVE — GENESIS 17
PEOPLE OF THE PROMISE

PROMISE

— GENESIS 12-25 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Genesis 17:1-8 – Thirteen long years have elapsed since the events of the previous chapter (cf. 16:16 & 17:1). Abram's failing, along with the domestic turmoil that ensued, left him in need of God's reassurance. God thus issues a second covenant renewal (similar to Genesis 15), to bolster Abram's faith in God's covenant promises.

In so doing, God reveals two new names – firstly his own, *God Almighty* (Hebrew: *El Shaddai*, perhaps literally *God of the Mountains*). God seeks to enlarge Abram's vision of himself so that he might understand that nothing is impossible for God whose majesty and might are more weighty than the most imposing of mountain ranges.

Secondly, Abram becomes Abraham (literally *father of many*). *El Shaddai* will himself ensure that the childless and ageing Abraham won't just be the father of a nation, but of many nations and of kings. Indeed the very act of renaming Abraham is reflective of God's power and authority, and was common practise in ancient treaties whereby a superior king would rename the lesser one as a demonstration of control and power (2 Ki 24:17).

Genesis 17:9-14 - Abraham thus found himself in the benevolent crosshairs of a truly mighty God. Accordingly, there can be no other response to His covenant of grace than complete surrender and obedience. This is reflected in the covenant symbol of circumcision.

Promised offspring, it is fitting that the sign of the covenant is connected with Abraham's reproductive organ – a reminder that God alone, and not human scheming, would bring about the promise.

Furthermore, like the dividing of the carcasses in Genesis 15, the circumcision ritual is self-maledictory - 'When the foreskin is cut off, the implicit significance of the ritual is that it indicates that if this child breaks the covenant, he will be *cut off* from God and the community and thrown away.' (Longman, 221). Like a wedding ring, the sign was permanent and to be reflective of faithfulness to one's covenant relationship with God (see sidebar). Without this symbol one could not participate in God's covenant community.

Genesis 17:15-27 – Two further names are revealed here: Isaac, a reflection of the joyous blessing that God would bring in the long awaited provision of a son. Sarah (west Semitic pronunciation of eastern *Sarai*, both meaning *Princess* – Longman, 220), reinforcing God's promise that Abraham and Sarah were effectively royals by virtue of God's promise - rulers of the land and ancestors to Kings. To all of this Abraham and his household model the appropriate response to God's covenant of grace, absolute surrender and obedience in adhering to the circumcision command.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT CIRCUMCISION

Under the Old Covenant, circumcision was a sign for males and their households of belonging to God's covenant community. It reflected externally what God desired internally – wholehearted devotion to Him. Israel are thus repeatedly called to turn away from sin and circumcise their *hearts* to the Lord (cf. Jer 4:4; 9:26; Deut 10:16; 30:6 etc)

Yet Israel's repeated failure evidenced the hardness of heart which sin brings and of our need for God's intervention in Christ to circumcise our hearts so that we might become part of God's covenant community.

Colossians 2:11-13 describes how Christ brings this about -

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins...

By faith we are joined to Christ such that the guilt and power of our sinful nature was cut off through his death on the cross, and our hearts made new through his resurrection life. Baptism symbolises this dying to sin and coming to life in Christ and so replaces circumcision as the rite of welcome into God's church.

GETTING STARTED

1. Is there any significance to the name(s) that you've been given? For parents, is there any significance to the names that you've given your children?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Genesis 17:1-8

2. Why might the Lord have needed to renew or re-affirm his covenant with Abram?
3. What is the meaning and purpose of each of the two new names given here?
4. Abram's faith needed redirecting to God's might and greatness. Do you see any evidences in our collective life of faith that betrays a belief in a small or domesticated God?

Read Genesis 17:9-14

5. In what way(s) was the cutting off of the foreskin symbolic of the Lord's covenant with Abraham? (Hint: 17:2 & 14)
6. Read Jeremiah 4:4 & Romans 2:28-29. How did the sign of circumcision display outwardly what God desires inwardly of all of his people?
7. How does the sign circumcision in the Old Covenant relate to the sign baptism in the New? (cf. Col 2:9-15)
8. What do both these signs reveal about how God desires us to respond to his grace?

Read Genesis 17:15-27

9. What is the meaning and significance of each of the two new names given here?
10. In what ways do you resonate with, or are challenged by, Abraham's response to the Lord in these verses?

TAKEAWAY

11. 'When we fail to recognize the incredible grace and condescension of God in entering a relationship with us – the Lord of heaven with utter sinners – we desire a God who won't change our lives and make demands of us.' (Duguid, 83)

What most often stops you from going 'all-in' for God? Share with the group then pray for each other.