

Genesis 17:1-26—Circumcision And Baptism: Pictures Of Dying To Or Cutting Away The Sinful Nature

Memory Verse

Genesis 15:6 NLT—*Justification by faith*

And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith.

Revision from Genesis chapter 16

1. A seed must die before it can bear fruit

John 12:24 NKJV

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain [lit: fruit].

Simply put, dying to self or denying ourselves means we make doing what God wants more important than what we want. Sometimes what God gives us, including His promises, family, our work, and even Christian ministry, become more important to us than God Himself—we *begin to love the gift instead of the giver*. We know that we have made the gift more important than the giver when we start to prioritise the gift above our relationship with God, and therefore become obsessed with it—we will do almost anything to get it and/or keep it—at any cost. We saw this in Genesis chapter 16 with Sarai not being content with her relationship with God, and so becoming obsessed with having a child—at any cost. Putting all our energy into something, even into a good thing, is not a good thing, if God is not in it—it's just human effort, a work of the flesh.

“Those who are truly zealous for God frequently reach for fruit without first dying. Unfortunately much Christian work is done in this way, and while there is conception, the child that is born can never be the heir. Christian work that is done merely through the zeal of human effort without counting the body as dead, and Sarai as good as dead, may produce great revival campaigns with but a few genuinely saved, large church memberships with many tares among the wheat.” (Barnhouse)

“It is much better to receive God’s help than to try and help Him with our own wisdom and even unbelief... When we impatiently try to fulfill God’s promises in our own effort, it accomplishes nothing and may even prolong the time until the promise is fulfilled. Jacob had to live as an exile for 25 years because he thought he had to arrange the fulfillment of God’s promise to get his father’s blessing. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years in the desert after he tried to arrange the fulfillment of God’s promise by murdering an Egyptian.” (David Guzik)

2. We don't need a change of circumstances, we need a change of heart

“Hagar might have returned and said, “I fled from you all because I was so miserable and thought I could not continue here. But the LORD met me and told me He would see me through. He told me to come back and submit to you, so that is why I’m here.” After meeting with El Roi, (You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees), Hagar knew that if God could be with her in the wilderness, He would be with her in having to submit to Sarai also.” (David Guzik)

“If we seek to change our circumstances, we will jump from the frying pan into the fire. We must be triumphant exactly where we are. It is not a change of climate we need, but a change of heart. The flesh wants to run away, but God wants to demonstrate His power exactly where we have known our greatest chagrin.” (Barnhouse)

Outline (Genesis 17:1-26)

1. God appears to Abram when He is 99 years old (vs 1-2)
2. God reaffirms the covenants to Abram (vs 3-8)
3. God institutes circumcision as a sign of the covenant for Abraham and his descendants (vs 9-14)
4. God changes Sarai's name to Sarah and reaffirms His promise to her (15-16)
5. The great faith of Abraham in the face of a physical impossibility (v 17)
6. Ishmael will be physically blessed, but Isaac is the child of promise through whom the Messiah would come (18-22)
7. Abraham obeys God—his whole household is circumcised on the very same day (23-26)

Genesis 17:1-26 NKJV

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. ² And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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."

⁹ And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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."

¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ 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?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

²³ 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. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

1. God appears to Abram when He is 99 years old

Genesis 17:1-2 NKJV

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. ² And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

v 1 **When Abram was ninety-nine years old:** This is 13 years after the birth of Ishmael, and 24 years since God first gave Abram the promise of a son, back when Abram was 75 years old. Consider that it's been 13 years since God last revealed Himself to Abram in what we would call a "specular" or "memorable" way. For 13 years Abram has been conversing with God by the normal means which we have available to us today—the word of God, prayer, and fellowship with other believers.

Application: "Faith means we walk not by what we see physically, by what we hear audibly or by what we know intellectually. Faith means we hang on to what God said previously. We just hang on.

Think back for a moment to a time in the not too distant past when you thought, "This will never work. Everything's going wrong. I'll never make it." Yet here you are today. Why did God allow those things to happen in that way? To teach you to be a man or woman of faith, to teach you to quietly and confidently believe that God is on the throne, that He is in control, that all things work together for good." (Jon Courson)

v 1 **The LORD appeared to Abram:** This is another Christophany, a temporary, physical, human appearance of Jesus Christ before His incarnation (when He permanently added humanity to His deity).

v 1 **I am Almighty God:** What God does first, before He asks anything from us, is reveal His person and character to us, usually in a new and unique way. We first need to know that God is able to do what He is asking us to do or promising to do for us. This is the first time this name of God, El Shaddai, is used. While different commentators come to slightly different conclusions as to exactly what the name El Shaddai means, the overall consensus is that God is: strong, sufficient, tender, all powerful, pours out blessings, and is in control.

v 1 **Walk before Me and be blameless:** After revealing to Abram who He is, God now lets Abram know what He expects of him. This also what God wants of all believers—to *walk before Him and be blameless*. The word "blameless" means to be whole or complete. This is the opposite of being double minded or half-hearted. God wants all of us. He demands that we forsake all else, that we put Him first. God wants total commitment. As someone said, "*Salvation is free, but it will cost you everything.*" To walk before God means to live a life that is pleasing in His sight, to obey God's will for us in every part of our lives.

A conditional promise: Remember that God is talking to Abram as a believer. This command is not for salvation, but for fellowship—it's a conditional promise. Abraham is saved, that's a done deal. But Abraham walking in fellowship with God is a day by day choice that Abraham must make. If Abraham walks with God and is blameless, then he will enjoy fellowship with God. Jesus gives us the same conditional promise in the Gospel of John.

John 15:9-14 NLT

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in My love. ¹⁰ **When you obey My commandments, you remain in My love, just as I obey My Father's commandments and remain in His love.** ¹¹ **I have told you these things so that you will be filled with My joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!** ¹² This is My commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. ¹³ There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are My friends if you do what I command.

v 2 **I will make My covenant between Me and you:** God is going to reaffirm His promises to Abram. Why is this? Because we are so prone to forgetting. Time goes on, and we need some reassurance. This is why we need to be in the Word of God daily—we need daily reminding of who God is and his promises for us to keep our faith in God strong.

2. God reaffirms the covenants to Abram—land and nation

Genesis 17:3-8 NKJV

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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."

v 3 **Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying:** God invites us to come *boldly* to the throne of grace, where we will obtain mercy and find grace to help. However, the only condition is that we must also come *humbly*. Our *boldness* comes from knowing and understanding that God has already promised to give us everything we need. As our loving Heavenly Father, God wants us to come expectantly, understanding that He loves us and delights to bless us. It's just like a little child has no reservations about asking their parents for help—they just ask and are completely honest about their needs.

Hebrews 4:16 NKJV

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Humility is required because before we can expect to receive anything from God, we must have given up relying on ourselves and seeking our own pleasure, and instead depend completely on God and seek His will only. We must also respect God as our Sovereign, our King. Otherwise, we will either not seek God's help at all, or we will be using God like a genie, as an easy way to get what we want. Abraham demonstrates both boldness and humility.

James 4:6 NKJV

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

v 5 **No longer shall your name be called Abram [exalted father or father of many], but your name shall be Abraham [Father of a multitude or many nations]; for I have made you a father of many nations:** This was an encouragement from God that Abraham would indeed be a father. Abram would have appreciated this. However, it would have been hard for Abraham to let others know about his name change. Just imagine how the conversation could have gone.

Abram: “God just changed my name from Abram (exalted father), to Abraham (father of many nations).”

Friend: “So, how many children do you have?”

Abraham: “None, yet. But I will, someday.”

Application: In the Bible, the names are often important. They define who we are. For example, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. Jacob means “heal catcher”, or “deceiver”. But God saw something else in Jacob—God saw Israel, meaning governed by God—and it was eventually true for all to see. Think of the names that God has given us as believers—think of how God sees us: saint, righteous, chosen, royal priesthood, sons of God, etc. God knows everything. He knows His plans for our lives, and the person He is transforming us to be. God promises to accomplish the meaning of all these names in us, even if it seems impossible to us now. Just remember that God is in the process of changing lives, and God says several times in Scripture, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” Of course the answer is a resounding no!

v 7 **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:** Here is a precious promise—God will never leave His chosen physical nation of Israel—God will never abandon them.

Jeremiah 31:35-37 NLT

It is the LORD who provides the sun to light the day and the moon and stars to light the night, and who stirs the sea into roaring waves. His name is the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, and this is what He says: ³⁶ “I am as likely to reject my people Israel as I am to abolish the laws of nature!”

³⁷ This is what the LORD says: “Just as the heavens cannot be measured and the foundations of the earth cannot be explored, so I will not consider casting them away for the evil they have done. I, the LORD, have spoken!”

Remember that Israel is the shadow, the physical picture of the spiritual reality. How do we know that God will never leave us as believers? Because God has never abandoned Israel. God gives each believer a similar promise to what He gave Israel. It doesn’t matter how many times we lose faith and rebel, God will always remain faithful to us.

Hebrews 13:5-6 NLT

Don’t love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, “I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.” ⁶ So we can say with confidence, “The LORD is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?”

1 Timothy 2:13 NLT

If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny who He is [God’s character is faithful by nature, and He cannot change].

v 8 **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.”:** Here God is reminding Abraham that the land of Canaan, only part of which is what we now call the land of Israel, is an **everlasting possession**, but not just to Abraham, it includes all his descendants (from Isaac).

v 8 **Descendants:** It's very interesting that every time God refers to this promise of Abraham having children, the word **descendants** is always *singular*. Why? Because the nation of Israel exists only for one purpose—Jesus the Messiah, the Saviour of the world (see John 4:42, 1 John 4:14), will be the Seed or Descendant through whom all the earth will be blessed (see Genesis 22:18 and Galatians 3:16). All the promises concerning Israel, which to date have only been partially fulfilled, will be fulfilled in their entirety only when this Promised Seed, Jesus Christ, comes back the second time and rules and reigns from His Millennial temple in Jerusalem for 1,000 years. The future of Israel revolves around Jesus the Messiah.

3. God institutes circumcision as a sign of the covenant for Abraham and his descendants

Genesis 17:9-14 NKJV

And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

v 9-10 **And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you:** This is a perpetual covenant for the nation of Israel, throughout all their generations.

v 10-11 **Every male child among you shall be circumcised; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins:** Circumcision is the physical or outward sign of an inward change. We'll come back to this in the applications below.

v 11 **It shall be a sign of the covenant:** This isn't something Abraham has to do to earn the covenant blessings, but rather something that he does to show that he has already received the promises by faith.

Application: Why choose circumcision as the “sign” of the covenant?

God wanted every male, slave or free, who was a part of the nation of Israel, to have their foreskin cut away. There are many important reasons for this:

1. Circumcision was already a ritual practice for various peoples.
2. Better hygiene and health: “There is some medical evidence that this practice has indeed contributed to the long-lasting vigour of the Jewish race.” (Morris)
“McMillan, in *None of These Diseases*, noted studies in 1949 and 1954 showing an incredibly low rate of cervical cancer for Jewish women, because they mostly have husbands who are circumcised.” (David Guzik)

3. “Because circumcision deals with the organ of procreation, it was a reminder of the special seed of Abraham, which would ultimately bring the Messiah.” (David Guzik)

4. It is a sign that nobody sees. Salvation, the cutting away of our sinful nature, is also an invisible change (physically speaking). Again, circumcision is a physical or outward (albeit hidden) sign of an internal change—God accounted Abram as righteous because of His faith (see Genesis 15:6).

5. *The most important reason is its spiritual symbolism.* Paul in Colossians tells us that circumcision is the cutting away of the flesh or sinful nature, meaning circumcision is a good reminder that we should put no confidence in the flesh (our sinful nature or human effort). It is also a picture of salvation, similar to baptism in the New Testament, in that, just like with baptism, it is a clear symbol that the old life is cut away, or dead and gone, and a new life has begun.

Colossians 2:11-14 NLT

When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. ¹² For you were buried with Christ when you were baptised. And with Him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

¹³ You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature [flesh] was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for He forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

Application: Proving that New Testament baptism is not a prerequisite for salvation, but an outward sign of a prior inward change, just like circumcision was for Abram

First, let’s consider Abraham. Paul in Romans chapter 4 clearly tells us that Abram was saved by faith before he receive the sign of circumcision. Circumcision for Abraham was clearly an outward sign representing a prior inner transformation.

Romans 4:1-11 NLT

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? ² If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God’s way. ³ For the Scriptures tell us, “Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.”

⁴ When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. ⁵ But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. ⁶ David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it:

⁷ “Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight.

⁸ Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of sin.”

⁹ Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? **Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith. ¹⁰ But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!**

¹¹ Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised.

So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith.

Now, let's consider New Testament baptism, when someone believes and is then subsequently baptised as a public confession of faith. They are proclaiming that their old life is gone, and the new life has begun. Their sinful nature has been cut away. They are living the resurrection life, living by the power of the risen Christ. We'll read Colossians again which helps us to see the link between baptism and circumcision—how the two rituals are basically synonymous.

Colossians 2:11-14 NLT

When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. ¹² For you were buried with Christ when you were baptised. And with Him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

¹³ You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature [flesh] was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for He forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

The Bible teaches in many places that a person must be saved first, and then get baptised. The symbol means nothing if there has been no prior inner change or transformation. Phillip preaching to the Ethiopian Eunuch and then baptising him is an example of this.

Acts 8:35-38 AMP

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this portion of Scripture he announced to him the glad tidings (Gospel) of Jesus and about Him.

³⁶ And as they continued along on the way, they came to some water, and the eunuch exclaimed, See, [here is] water! What is to hinder my being baptised?

³⁷ And Philip said, If you believe with all your heart [if you have a conviction, full of joyful trust, that Jesus is the Messiah and accept Him as the Author of your salvation in the kingdom of God, giving Him your obedience, then] you may. And he replied, I do believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

³⁸ And he ordered that the chariot be stopped; and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and [Philip] baptised him.

Answering a common objection regarding baptism

Mark 16:16 NLT

Anyone who believes and is baptised will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.

If we only had the first part of the above verse, “*Anyone who believes and is baptised will be saved*”, we would come to the conclusion that a person must both believe *and* be baptised to be saved, that baptism is a prerequisite for salvation—that we cannot be forgiven until we are baptised. However, when we use scripture to interpret scripture—it is clear that we only need to be believe to be saved, and not be baptised as well. Why? The next part of the verse makes it clear that only believing is required for salvation. It says, “*But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.*” If it were true that a person had to be baptised before being forgiven, then the verse would have read, “*But anyone who refuses to believe [and get baptised] will be condemned.*” Clearly, condemnation results from only one thing—a refusal to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and receive the free gift of the forgiveness of sins. Also consider what Jesus says in the gospel of John.

John 8:23-24 NKJV

And He said to them, “You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; **for if you do not believe that I AM [see Exodus 3:14], you will die in your sins.**”

John 16:8-9 NKJV

And when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin, ... ⁹ of sin, **because they do not believe in Me.**

So it's very clear that baptism only happens after a person has made the conscious decision to repent and believe. Also, if a Christian doesn't get baptised, then it doesn't mean that they will go to hell when they die.

v 12 **He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations:** Why at 8 days old? Because this is when the baby's immune system is at the optimum level for this medical procedure. Also, two blood clotting agents, vitamin K and prothrombin are at high (or highest) levels at the eighth day, making it the safest and earliest time to circumcise the male babies.

v 14 **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.”:** It's very simple—to reject the sign of the covenant meant that you rejected the covenant—you were no longer a part of God's covenant people, the nation of Israel. Again, if a Jew wanted to be a physical member of God's chosen nation, they must be circumcised. Remember that this is a physical picture of a spiritual reality or truth.

What is the spiritual reality? If a person rejects Christ's forgiveness, then their sinful nature is not cut off—they have refused to be spiritually circumcised—they have not been adopted into God's spiritual family.

The Jew's misunderstanding of circumcision: “Unfortunately, through the centuries, the Jews began to trust more in the sign of the covenant (circumcision) than in the God of the covenant, believing that circumcision by itself was sufficient and necessary to save. Paul refutes this idea extensively, especially in light of the finished work of Jesus (Galatians 5:1–15).” (David Guzik)

Do New Testament believers need to be circumcised?: Christians are free to choose whether or not to be circumcised. It makes no difference to their relationship with God. There may be social or hygiene reasons, but there is no scriptural reason. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 5:6 NLT

For when we place our faith in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is faith expressing itself in love.

4. God changes Sarai's name to Sarah and reaffirms His promise to her

Genesis 17:15-16 NKJV

Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ 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.”

“Sarai signifies my lady, or my princess, which confines her dominion to one family; but Sarah signifies either a lady or princess, simply and absolutely without restriction, or the princess of a multitude” (Poole).

God also reassures Sarah that her son would come from her own body, something that was physically impossible for Sarah who had already gone through menopause (see below).

5. The great faith of Abraham in the face of a physical impossibility

Genesis 17:17 NKJV

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?”

Romans 4:18-19 makes it clear that Abraham’s laugh was not one of unbelief or ridicule, but rather of amazement and joy. *“Even when there was no reason for hope, Abraham kept hoping—believing that he would become the father of many nations. For God had said to him, “That’s how many descendants you will have!”* ¹⁹ **And Abraham’s faith did not weaken, even though, at about 100 years of age, he figured his body was as good as dead—and so was Sarah’s womb.**” (NLT)

6. Ishmael will be physically blessed, but Isaac is the child of promise through whom the Messiah would come

Genesis 17:18-22 NKJV

And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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 [the Arab peoples]. ²¹ But My covenant [the promises] I will establish with Isaac [laughter], whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” ²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

v 18 **Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!**: Yes, as we saw in verse 17, Abraham did have faith. But did he have complete understanding of what God was doing? Obviously not. You can understand Abraham’s dilemma. He loved Ishmael, and probably thought that Ishmael receiving the promises would be a much more convenient plan. We can understand Abraham’s situation. For all of us, it is hard to trust God for more than what we can conceive of or imagine, or what we don’t understand. Abraham didn’t yet fully understand that God rejects everything we do on our own strength—therefore Ishmael was rejected as the descendant that the promises would be passed on to.

7. Abraham obeys God—his whole household is circumcised on the very same day

Genesis 17:23-27 NKJV

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.

²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Abraham’s obedience was proof that he actually had already put his trust in God’s promises (see James chapter 2, faith without works is dead—our works are the evidence that our faith is real, they are the fruit of our salvation). Abraham’s obedience is a good model for us to follow: it was *immediate* (without delay), and *complete* (all the males were circumcised). When God calls us to do something, our obedience is a test of whether or not we actually trust God or not.