

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: God Almighty and the Covenant Sign

Genesis 17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Genesis 17 reopens the promise after thirteen years of narrative silence, and it does so by anchoring everything in the character of God. The chapter opens with a divine self-disclosure, “I am God Almighty” (El Shaddai), spoken to a ninety-nine-year-old man whose situation is, humanly, hopeless. The historical weight matters: Abraham and Sarah are far past childbearing, Ishmael is already thirteen, and from every earthly angle the promise of a son through Sarah is absurd. God’s name is the answer to that absurdity. The God who is Almighty grounds the entire covenant, the new names, the everlasting promise, and the sign that will mark His people.

Several doctrinal threads deserve attention. First, the call to “walk before me, and be blameless” shows that the covenant relationship, while given by grace, summons a wholehearted, undivided life of obedience; grace and the call to holiness are not opposed. Second, the new names teach that God grounds the identity of His people in His promise rather than in their past or circumstances. Third, circumcision as the covenant sign foreshadows the circumcision of the heart and, as Paul explicitly teaches in Colossians 2:11–12, the New Covenant sign of baptism into Christ. Handle this connection carefully: do not read New Testament baptism anachronistically back into Abraham’s experience, but do show, as Paul does, that the outward sign always pointed to an inward, heart-level reality, fulfilled for us in Christ.

The doctrinal climax (Question 9) holds together God’s power to do the impossible, the everlasting covenant established through Isaac the child of promise rather than Ishmael the child of human effort, and Abraham’s immediate, costly obedience that very day. Guard against a premillennial or merely nationalistic reading of the “everlasting” covenant and land; their fulfillment is in Christ and His people, as Lesson 12 will develop. Pastorally, aim to lift the eyes of any in the room who have written off a situation as hopeless, to call the whole class to a wholehearted walk before God, and to press the difference between an outward, ritual religion and a truly circumcised heart.

Question 1

Student Question:

After thirteen years of silence, God appeared to ninety-nine-year-old Abram and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (v. 1). What does the name “God Almighty” (El Shaddai) reveal about God, and how does His all-sufficient power form the foundation for the covenant and the call that follow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene of hopelessness first, because the name answers it. Thirteen silent years have passed; Abraham is ninety-nine; Sarah is ninety; the situation is, by every human measure, finished. Into that closed door God speaks His name: I am God Almighty. The name is not abstract theology; it is the direct answer to an impossible situation.

Explain the force of El Shaddai. The name speaks of God's overwhelming sufficiency and power, His ability to provide and to accomplish what no creature could. Before God asks anything of Abraham or promises anything to him, He establishes who He is. Everything that follows rests on this foundation: a God for whom nothing is too hard.

Show how the name grounds both the covenant and the call. The promise of a son to ancient bodies is believable only because the One promising is Almighty. And the call to walk blamelessly is possible only in dependence on the God who is sufficient. Faith does not rest on our resources but on God's power; that is why the name comes first.

Apply it to the believer's discouragement. Many of us are tempted to shrink God down to the size of our circumstances. This chapter does the opposite, sizing our circumstances against the God who is Almighty. The starting point of faith is always a right vision of who God is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- El Shaddai: God's overwhelming sufficiency and power
- God revealing who He is before He commands or promises
- Faith resting on God's power, not our resources
- Sizing our circumstances against God rather than God against our circumstances

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God reveal His name before making the promise?
- How does a right vision of God change the way we face an impossible situation?
- Where have you let God shrink to the size of your circumstances?

Question 2

Student Question:

We affirm that God is all-powerful, yet often live as though some situation in our lives is too far gone for Him. Where are you quietly treating a circumstance, a relationship, or a longing as beyond God's reach? What would change if you truly believed nothing is too hard for Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Name the gap between confessed and functional belief. Almost everyone in the room would affirm that God is all-powerful. Far fewer live as if that power touches the specific situation they

have privately filed under hopeless: a hardened family member, a long-dead dream, an addiction, a marriage, a wayward child.

Help them locate their own 'too far gone' place. The point is not to manufacture naive optimism, but to refuse to put any situation outside the reach of God Almighty. Abraham's case was as closed as a case can be, and God reopened it.

Distinguish believing God can from demanding God must. Faith trusts God's power and His wisdom together; it does not presume to dictate the outcome. The change God seeks is that we stop writing situations off and start bringing them, with renewed hope, to the God for whom nothing is impossible. Invite one such situation to be lifted before Him this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between confessed and functional belief in God's power
- Refusing to place any situation beyond God's reach
- Trusting God's power and wisdom together, not dictating the outcome
- Bringing the written-off situation back to God in hope

Discussion Prompts

- What situation have you quietly filed under hopeless?
- What is the difference between believing God can and demanding God must?
- What would renewed hope in God's power change about how you pray for it?

Question 3

Student Question:

God's call was, "walk before me, and be blameless" (v. 1), a summons to wholehearted, undivided covenant living rather than flawless perfection. What does it mean to "walk before God," and how does this call to integrity flow out of, rather than earn, the covenant relationship God graciously offers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define the phrase carefully. To "walk before God" is to live one's whole life in the conscious presence of God, aware that He sees every step. "Be blameless" does not demand sinless perfection (which Abraham clearly lacked) but wholeness, integrity, an undivided heart that does not live one way before God and another way in secret.

Show the order: covenant first, then call. God does not say, "Be blameless, and then I will enter covenant with you." He establishes the covenant by grace and then calls Abraham to a life worthy of it. The obedience flows out of the relationship; it does not purchase it. This is the consistent biblical pattern, grace that calls forth a holy life, not a holy life that earns grace.

Hold grace and the call to holiness together. Some so stress grace that obedience becomes optional; others so stress obedience that grace disappears. Genesis 17 holds both: a freely given covenant and a serious call to walk before God wholeheartedly. The covenant people are a called people.

Apply it to integrity. A divided walk, devout in public and careless in private, is the opposite of walking before God. The call is to let the awareness of God's presence shape the hidden places of life, not just the visible ones. This sets up the personal question that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Walking before God as living in His conscious presence
- Blameless as wholehearted integrity, not sinless perfection
- Covenant grace first, then the call to a worthy life
- Holding grace and the call to holiness together

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to walk before God in everyday life?
- How does obedience flow out of the covenant rather than earn it?
- Why must we hold grace and the call to holiness together?

Question 4

Student Question:

To "walk before God" is to live every moment aware that He sees. Where is your walk most divided, more careful when others are watching than when you think no one is? In what specific area is God calling you to greater integrity and wholeness this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Press the test of the unwatched moment. Integrity is who we are when no one is looking: our private thoughts, our phone in solitude, how we treat people who can do nothing for us, what we do with time and money no one audits. A divided walk is careful onstage and careless backstage.

Help the class name the specific arena. For one it is the secret life of the screen; for another it is honesty in small things; for another it is the gap between their reputation at church and their conduct at home. The goal is one concrete area, not a vague resolve to be better.

Reframe God's gaze as loving, not merely surveilling. Walking before God is not living under an anxious spotlight but living in the company of a Father who sees us with love and wants our wholeness. That awareness motivates integrity by relationship, not just fear. Invite one step toward a more undivided walk this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integrity as who we are when unwatched
- Naming the specific divided area
- God's gaze as loving presence, not anxious surveillance
- A concrete step toward wholeness

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most different in private than in public?
- What is one specific area where God is calling you to integrity?
- How does seeing God's gaze as loving change your motivation?

Question 5

Student Question:

God changed Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude") and Sarai to Sarah, renaming them for a future they could not yet see (vv. 5, 15–16). What does this giving of new names reveal about how God grounds our identity in His promise rather than in our past or our circumstances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Highlight the audacity of the new name. God renames a childless ninety-nine-year-old "father of a multitude." Every time someone called him Abraham, they would be speaking a promise not yet fulfilled. God attached his identity to His word rather than to his present reality.

Draw the principle about identity. We naturally define ourselves by our past (what we have done or suffered), our circumstances (what we have or lack), or others' verdicts. God defines His people by His promise and His call. He renames; He gives a new identity rooted in what He will do, not in what we have been.

Connect to the New Testament. In Christ, believers receive a new identity: children of God, a new creation, saints, a chosen people (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 2:9). Like Abraham, we are called to live into the name God gives rather than the labels our past assigns. God's word about us is meant to be truer to us than our own self-assessment.

Apply it pastorally. Some carry names the world or their own failures have given them: failure, unwanted, too much, not enough. God's renaming of Abraham is good news for them. Identity in God's promise is more stable and more true than any label circumstance can pin on us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God grounding identity in His promise, not our past or present
- Living into the name God gives rather than the labels we carry

- The believer's new identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 2:9)
- God's word about us as truer than our self-verdict

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it striking that God renamed a childless man "father of a multitude"?
- What names have your past or circumstances given you?
- What new identity does God give His people in Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

God redefined Abraham's identity by His promise, not by his age, his failures, or his empty arms. Do you tend to define yourself by your past, your failures, or your circumstances, or by who God says you are? Where do you most need to let God's word about you be truer than your own verdict on yourself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Invite honest self-assessment about the source of identity. Ask the class where they instinctively look to answer the question, "Who am I?" For many it is achievement, relationships, appearance, or their worst failures. These are shifting and often cruel foundations.

Set God's verdict against the inner critic. Many believers carry a harsh internal voice that contradicts what God says about them in Christ. Spiritual maturity learns to let God's word be the louder and truer voice: forgiven, beloved, a child of God, a new creation. This is not denial of real sin but trust in God's real grace.

Make it specific. Ask each person to name the false identity they most need to release and the truth from God they most need to embrace. Suggest they anchor themselves in a specific Scripture that names who they are in Christ and return to it through the week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The shifting foundations of identity: achievement, relationships, failure
- Letting God's verdict be louder than the inner critic
- Identity in Christ as truth, not denial of sin
- Anchoring in a specific Scripture about who we are

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you instinctively look to answer "Who am I?"
- What false identity do you most need to release?
- What does God say about you that you most need to believe?

Question 7

Student Question:

God gave circumcision as “the sign of the covenant” to mark His people and their households as belonging to Him (vv. 9–14). What was the purpose of this outward sign, and how does it foreshadow the circumcision of the heart and the New Covenant sign of baptism, which Paul explicitly links to it (Colossians 2:11–12)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Explain the purpose of the sign. Circumcision was the God-given mark that distinguished Abraham’s household as the covenant people, a visible, bodily sign of belonging to the LORD. It was not what created the covenant relationship (Abraham was already counted righteous by faith in chapter 15), but it was the appointed seal and sign of it (compare Romans 4:11).

Note that the sign always pointed inward. Even within the Old Testament, God called His people to circumcise their hearts, not merely their flesh (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). The outward sign was meant to correspond to an inward reality of devotion and belonging. An uncircumcised heart made the bodily sign empty.

Bring in Paul’s explicit New Testament connection, carefully. In Colossians 2:11–12 Paul links the circumcision made without hands, “the circumcision of Christ,” with baptism: “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith.” The outward covenant sign of the old era foreshadows the heart-circumcision accomplished in Christ and signified in baptism, where, by faith, we are united with His death and resurrection. Be careful not to read New Testament baptism back into Abraham’s experience; rather, show how God’s pattern of an outward sign marking an inward, covenantal reality reaches its fulfillment for us in Christ.

Apply the principle. God has always marked His people and always required that the outward sign match an inward reality. For us who live under the New Covenant, this points to a faith that responds to the gospel and is united to Christ, not a mere external religion. Lesson 12 will develop how we come into Abraham’s blessing through faith and baptism into Christ; here the point is the meaning and inward direction of the covenant sign.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant, not its cause (Romans 4:11)
- The Old Testament call to circumcise the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4)
- Colossians 2:11–12, the circumcision of Christ linked to baptism
- Outward signs always pointing to an inward, covenantal reality
- Not reading New Testament baptism anachronistically into Abraham, but seeing the pattern fulfilled in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What was the purpose of circumcision as a covenant sign?
- Why did God always require the heart to match the outward sign?
- How does Paul connect this sign to our union with Christ in baptism?

Question 8

Student Question:

Circumcision was meant to mark an inward reality, yet Scripture warns that an outward sign without a changed heart is empty (Romans 2:28–29). Is there any way your own faith has become more about outward form and religious markers than about a heart truly devoted to God? Where does your heart need its own circumcision?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Press the danger of merely external religion. It is possible to have all the outward markers, attendance, baptism, religious vocabulary, moral respectability, while the heart drifts far from God. Paul's warning in Romans 2:28–29 is that the real circumcision is inward, of the heart, by the Spirit. The form without the heart is empty.

Help the class examine themselves without inducing despair. The question is not whether they are perfect but whether their religion has quietly become a matter of going through motions rather than loving God. Cold orthodoxy and routine religiosity are real dangers for long-time believers especially.

Point toward heart renewal. The remedy for empty form is not abandoning the forms but reuniting them with a devoted heart, returning to genuine love for God, honest repentance, and real communion with Him. Invite each person to name where their heart has grown formal and to ask God to circumcise it afresh.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of external religion without inward devotion (Romans 2:28–29)
- Outward markers coexisting with a drifting heart
- Self-examination without despair
- Reuniting the forms of faith with a devoted heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your faith leaned on outward markers more than inward devotion?
- What is the difference between going through the motions and loving God?
- Where does your heart need fresh circumcision?

Question 9

Student Question:

God Almighty promised a son to a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman, established the everlasting covenant through Isaac the child of promise (not Ishmael the child of human effort), and Abraham obeyed the costly command that very day (vv. 15–27). How does this chapter hold together God’s sovereign power to do the impossible, His gracious initiative in the everlasting covenant fulfilled in Christ, and the immediate, obedient faith that such a covenant calls for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This heaviest block gathers the chapter’s threads, so take it in three movements. First, God’s power to do the impossible. A son from a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman is biologically absurd, and that is the point. Romans 4:18–21 says Abraham grew strong in faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. The covenant rests on the power of El Shaddai, not on human possibility. Where God’s promise outruns human ability, faith fixes on God’s power.

Second, God’s gracious initiative in an everlasting covenant. God establishes the covenant; He sets its terms; He pledges it as everlasting. And He pointedly establishes it through Isaac, the child of promise yet to be born, not through Ishmael, the child produced by human effort in chapter 16. This reinforces the lesson of the previous chapter: God’s purposes are fulfilled by His gracious gift, not by what we manufacture in the flesh. The everlasting covenant finds its fulfillment not in a political nation or a future earthly kingdom, but in Christ, the promised Seed, and in His people who become Abraham’s offspring by faith (Galatians 3:16, 29). Guard the class here against any premillennial or merely nationalistic reading; the permanence of the covenant is realized spiritually in Christ and His church, a theme Lesson 12 will complete.

Third, the obedient faith the covenant calls for. Notice the chapter’s final movement: Abraham took every male of his household and obeyed the painful command of circumcision “that very day.” The God of grace establishes the covenant, and the man of faith responds with immediate, costly obedience. This is the pattern the whole study presses: God’s grace and human obedient faith are not rivals. The covenant is God’s gift, and the proper response to the gift is wholehearted, unhesitating obedience.

Tie the three together so the class sees one coherent picture. The God who is Almighty graciously gives an everlasting covenant fulfilled in Christ, and those who belong to that covenant respond, as Abraham did, with the obedience of faith. This is not salvation earned by works, and it is not a passive faith that never obeys; it is grace received through a trusting, obeying faith, the very faith for which Abraham is called the father of the faithful.

Close with the contrast that makes obedience reasonable. Abraham obeyed at once because he had come to trust the One who spoke. When we are convinced that God is Almighty and

gracious, immediate obedience is not legalism; it is the only sensible response to such a God. Delayed or negotiated obedience usually betrays a small view of who God is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's power to do the humanly impossible (Romans 4:18–21)
- The everlasting covenant as God's gracious initiative
- The covenant through Isaac the child of promise, not Ishmael the child of effort
- Fulfillment in Christ and His church, against premillennial or nationalistic readings (Galatians 3:16, 29)
- Immediate, costly obedience as the response of faith ("that very day")
- Grace and obedient faith held together, not as rivals

Discussion Prompts

- How does Abraham's situation showcase the power of God Almighty?
- Why does God establish the covenant through Isaac rather than Ishmael?
- What does Abraham's same-day obedience teach about the response faith should make?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. You have met God Almighty, heard the call to walk before Him blamelessly, watched Him rename His people for a promised future, and seen Abraham obey at once. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this part of Abraham's story. What is the single truth about God's power, your identity, or wholehearted obedience that you most need to carry into this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Press for one concrete takeaway. Some need fresh confidence in God's power over a hopeless situation; some need to receive their identity from God's promise rather than their past; some need to close the gap of a divided walk; some need to obey, today, something they have been delaying. Let each name their own.

Point to Christ. Jesus is the promised Seed in whom the everlasting covenant is fulfilled, and He is the one who walked perfectly before the Father and calls us to follow. Being formed by this chapter means trusting the God for whom nothing is impossible, living in the new identity He gives us in Christ, and obeying Him without delay.

End with encouragement. The God who reopened a closed door for Abraham, renamed him, and kept His everlasting covenant in Christ is the same God at work in the class. They can carry into the week a larger view of His power and a readier obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from the chapter to a concrete response
- Christ as the promised Seed who fulfills the everlasting covenant
- Trusting God's power, living in our new identity, obeying without delay
- Confidence in the God for whom nothing is impossible

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from this chapter do you most need this week?
- Where is God calling you to trust His power or obey without delay?
- How does your identity in Christ change the way you face the week?