

September 10  
Lesson 2 (NIV)

# CIRCUMCISION

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Psalm 105:1-11](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Genesis 17](#)

## GENESIS 17:1-14

<sup>1</sup> When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. <sup>13</sup> Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”



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## KEY VERSE

*I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.—[Genesis 17:2](#)*

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Tell what God promised to Abraham and his descendants in the covenant of [Genesis 17](#).
2. Explain the symbolic value of circumcision.
3. Write a prayer of praise to God for his covenant-making nature.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. Marked for Life
- B. Lesson Background

### I. Great Promise ([GENESIS 17:1, 2](#))

- A. Passage of Time ([v. 1](#))
- B. Increase of Numbers ([v. 2](#))

### II. New Status ([GENESIS 17:3-8](#))

- A. Father of Nations ([vv. 3-7](#))

B. Possession of Land (v. 8)

*Everlasting Possession*

III. Personal Mark (GENESIS 17:9-14)

A. Significance of Obedience (vv. 9-13)

B. Penalty for Disobedience (v. 14)

*Recommended but Optional!*

Conclusion

A. Deal Breaker

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Marked for Life

German immigrant Martin Hildebrandt is said to have been the first professional tattoo artist in the United States. He traveled from camp to camp during the American Civil War, tattooing both Union and Confederate soldiers. The tradition of getting a tattoo to signify service in the American military continues to this day.

The permanent nature of a tattoo as well as the pain associated with getting one makes it a rite of passage in some sense for many today. Ancient Israelites were forbidden to “put tattoo marks” on their skin (Leviticus 19:28), but tattoos are mainstream in modern Western culture. One in three Americans between the ages of 18 and 50 has at least one tattoo.

Regardless of what one may think of this practice, such a permanent and visible mark is recognized as one of association. God gave Abraham and his descendants a permanent mark to show that they belonged to him. But the mark of circumcision was more personal and less visible.

### B. Lesson Background

Abraham, as we see him renamed in Genesis 17:5, first appears in the biblical record as Abram in 11:26. There his birth to Terah is noted, and the remainder of Genesis 11 records the family’s move from Ur of the Chaldeans (in modern Iraq) to Harran (in modern Syria).

God called Abram to leave his family (or most of it) and to go to a land that God would show him (Genesis 12:1). Scholars are divided on whether the call in chapter 12 is a repeat of an earlier call, in Ur, or is actually a record of the earlier call. In Stephen’s defense to the Sanhedrin, he affirmed that God called Abram “while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran” (Acts 7:2). God promised to make of Abram a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great (Genesis 12:2). He was age 75 when he left Harran for the land of Canaan (12:4).

God repeated his promise in Genesis 13. Abram had separated from nephew Lot because the land could not support the livestock of both groups (13:5-12). Lot had taken the lush Jordan valley toward Sodom, so Abram was left with land that had lesser pasture. It seemed he got the worse part of the deal, but God reassured him of his future (13:16, 17). The promises are stated a third time in Genesis 15. “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6).

The promises depended on Abram’s having an heir, but we see him childless through Genesis 15. Sarai, Abram’s wife, proposed a solution: “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her” (16:2). Abram agreed, and so he became the father of Ishmael by Sarai’s servant, Hagar. But Ishmael, born to Abram at age 86 (16:16), was not the child of promise.

## I. Great Promise

(GENESIS 17:1, 2)

### A. Passage of Time (v. 1)

**<sup>1</sup> When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.**

Thirteen years pass without notice in the divine record between Genesis 16:16 and 17:1, given mentions of Abram’s age. Whether the Lord appears or otherwise speaks to him during these 13 years, we cannot say. Some suggest that 13 years of silence is some kind of punishment for Abram because he went along with the idea of breaking sexual faithfulness to his wife, Sarai, in order to have a child. But like most all arguments from silence, this is mere conjecture.

## HOW TO SAY IT

Canaan *Kay-nun.*

Chaldeans *Kal-dee-unz.*

El-Shaddai (*Hebrew*) *El-Shad-eye.*

Harran *Hair-run.*

Ishmael *Ish-may-el.*

Keturah *Keh-too-ruh.*

Mesopotamia *Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh.*

Terah *Tair-uh.*

Ur *Er.*

The name by which *the Lord* identifies himself is *God Almighty*, the first of dozens of times he is designated as such (sometimes rendered simply as “the Almighty”). The Almighty God is *El Shaddai* in Hebrew, a term we hear in Christian songs today. The significance of this designation seems to be that God is

unlimited in his ability to act for the good of his people; nothing can thwart his plans.

*What Do You Think?*

How does the description of God as Almighty affect you personally? How should it?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In terms of courage
- In terms of confidence
- Other

That does not mean God's promises are unconditional, however. Here he puts the condition on Abram to *walk before me faithfully* (that is, to live to meet with God's approval) and *be blameless*. The two may seem to be one and the same, and from a God-centered perspective that is reasonable. But Abram's pagan culture is not centered on God; hardly anyone lives with the desire to please him. The emphasis here is on *before me*. In effect, God is saying "Make me, not your culture, your standard of conduct."

The word translated *blameless* is the same word used of Noah in [Genesis 6:9](#). It need not be understood as "absolute perfection," but more as "living with integrity in not being open to charges of wrongdoing." Putting the two together, we might see the conditions as living by God's standards (first) and also living in such a way that is respected by the people around him as well.

## B. Increase of Numbers (v. 2)

### **<sup>2</sup> "Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."**

This is the third time God has promised to bless Abram (see [Genesis 12:1-3](#); [15:1-21](#)). In the second blessing, God specifically told him that a son of Abram's own flesh and blood would be his heir ([15:4](#)). The record then notes the implications of Abram's belief ([15:6](#)).

In spite of that faith, Abram had come to believe that he needed to take matters in his own hands. When Sarai, his wife, suggests he take her servant Hagar as a surrogate wife, he agrees; Ishmael is born as a result. But the covenant of which God speaks does not involve Ishmael. God will multiply Abram through another son, one yet to be born to Abram and Sarai.

## II. New Status

([GENESIS 17:3-8](#))

### A. Father of Nations (vv. 3-7)

#### **<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,**

Abram is properly awed by this appearance of the Lord. Whether falling *facedown* means lying prostrate before God or dropping to his knees and bowing forward is not specified. In either case, Abram shows the respect due to the Lord.

*What Do You Think?*

How can we worship in the spirit Abram exhibited without literally falling on our faces?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding postures of humility
- Regarding attitudes of submission
- Regarding evidence of sincerity
- Other

#### **<sup>4</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations."**

Earlier God had promised to make of Abram "a great nation" ([Genesis 12:2](#)). Now the promise is that he will be *the father of many nations*. It is easy to read this and to see the fulfillment in Israel (through Isaac and his son Jacob), Edom (through Isaac and his son Esau), the nations that descend from Ishmael, and also the nations that descend from Abraham via Keturah (the woman he marries after Sarah's death; [Genesis 25:1-6](#)).

But there is more to the covenant than political nations, since Paul makes clear that Isaac alone is the heir of promise ([Romans 9:7](#)). Thus the nations primarily in view, the ones included in this promise, must come from Isaac, whom Abram will father.

#### **<sup>5</sup> "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."**

God gives two symbols of the covenant. The second symbol is described in [Genesis 17:10-14](#), below. The first is the name change we see here. Abram, whose name means "exalted father," is henceforth to be known as Abraham, which probably means *father of many*. As God repeats the promise of making Abraham such a father, he speaks as if it is already the case.

#### **<sup>6</sup> "I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."**

Abraham has one son at this point: Ishmael, whose mother is Hagar. God promises a greater fruitfulness to come. It will be seen in the birth of Isaac and, later, in the birth of six sons to Keturah ([Genesis 25:1, 2](#)). However, the key to the covenant promise is Isaac, so the fruitfulness God promises is Abraham's through his descendants. Grandson Jacob will have 12 sons and a daughter. The nation of Israel will come from these sons, with many kings born to them.

These kings will make their entrance some 900 years later with Saul. He will be a descendant of Abraham's great-grandson Benjamin. Greater far than the kings of Israel will be the King of kings and Lord of lords: Jesus (see [Matthew 1:1-16](#)).

#### **<sup>7</sup> "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."**

The language of *everlasting covenant* is the same used in [Genesis 9:16](#) (see [lesson 1](#)) and [Exodus 31:16](#) (see [lesson 3](#)). Insofar as it finds its fulfillment in Christ,

it is an enduring covenant in the fullest sense of the term *everlasting*. Paul makes clear that Christ is the fulfillment; see [Galatians 3:16](#), where the apostle distinguishes between the singular seed as opposed to the plural seeds. This indicates the fulfillment is in the one person, Jesus Christ.

Even so, there appears to be a dual fulfillment, as it is to *your descendants after you for the generations to come*. So the fulfillment is in the generations of Abraham's seed until the ultimate fulfillment is seen in Christ himself.

*What Do You Think?*

What does the dual fulfillment of this prophecy, regarding seed in singular and plural senses, suggest about its application to you?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding what you learn from Israel's experience
- Regarding what you learn about your spiritual inheritance in Christ
- Regarding how you value both physical and spiritual blessings

## B. Possession of Land (v. 8)

**8a. "The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession"**

Abraham has been in Canaan for more than two decades at this point, and still he owns none of it. Further, God has already said his descendants will be oppressed in a foreign land for 400 years ([Genesis 15:13](#)). Even so, God assures Abraham that his descendants will indeed be given *the whole land of Canaan . . . as an everlasting possession*.

### EVERLASTING POSSESSION

In 1831, Joseph Smith and his followers moved west to establish a communal society. They tried settling in various places, but strife seemed to follow them everywhere they went, often prompted by their nonbiblical doctrine.

The Mormons, as they came to be called, eventually began a colony in Nauvoo, Illinois. Smith was jailed in 1844 in nearby Carthage on a charge of riot (the charge was upgraded to treason). While incarcerated, he was killed by mob action on July 27, 1844.

Brigham Young succeeded Smith as leader. Young sought a promised land where his people would be free from the kind of strife that had dogged them. When in 1847 the travelers reached the valley of the Great Salt Lake in what is now Utah, Young said, "This is the place." The rest, as they say, is history.

Speaking of history, much of the teaching of Smith and Young is erroneous in that regard. One error was their supposition that a "promised land" could be found on earth. The opposite is true: we are "foreigners and exiles" on earth ([1 Peter 2:11](#)), where we live out our "time as foreigners here in reverent fear" ([1:17](#)). Our promised land is not a geographical location. Ultimately, neither was Abraham's. Even though "by faith he made his home in the promised land . . . he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" ([Hebrews 11:9, 10](#)). May we do so as well.

—C. R. B.

**8b. "to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."**

Even more important than the land promise is the relationship promise we see here. This promise is repeated in texts such as [Exodus 29:45](#) and is included in the new covenant that is promised in [Jeremiah 31:33](#). Humans have sought deities for centuries. When the search is insincere, the result is invented, fictitious gods. But when one seeks God wholeheartedly, he's not hard to find because he reveals himself ([Psalm 19:1](#); [Jeremiah 29:13](#); [Acts 17:27](#)). The God of Abraham's descendants is the living God.

*What Do You Think?*

How does the relationship promise of this verse affect you in ways different from knowing God as "Almighty" in [verse 1](#) above?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- When facing temptations
- When facing an uncertain future
- When grieving the loss of a loved one
- At other times

## III. Personal Mark

(GENESIS 17:9-14)

### A. Significance of Obedience (vv. 9-13)

**9. Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come."**

In exchange for the blessings to be accorded, Abraham and his descendants are to keep God's covenant. This means to submit to him as their God and obey his commandments. One of the first items requiring obedience is set forth in the next two verses.

**10, 11. "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you."**

The *sign of the covenant* is the circumcision of each male. This sign (symbol) is so important that it is spoken of as if it were the covenant in and of itself: *this is my covenant*. Circumcision will be the mark of God's people for generations.

When Jesus inaugurates the new covenant, physical circumcision will no longer play a part (1 [Corinthians 7:19](#)). But circumcision will still be of significant figurative importance. Circumcision—cutting off a small piece of flesh—becomes a symbol of putting off the sins of the flesh in the new covenant ([Colossians 2:11-13](#)). This circumcision is not done with hands; thus it is a spiritual event. [Colossians 2:12](#) connects it with baptism, a physical act and yet one in which God is working spiritually as well: “in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God.”

*What Do You Think?*

What can we do to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in circumcising our hearts? Explain.

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding use of spiritual gifts
- Regarding management of finances
- Regarding how we pray
- Other

**12. “For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring.**

Circumcision is to be done on the eighth day after a male child is born in the covenant family (compare [Leviticus 12:3](#); [Philippians 3:5](#)). This will become part of a ceremony that includes bestowing a name on the child (compare [Luke 1:59](#); [2:21](#)). The law applies both to natural-born sons and sons *who are not your offspring* (see also [Genesis 17:27](#); [Exodus 12:48](#)).

**13. “Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.**

The sign of the covenant is on the physical bodies of the covenant people, specifically on the sex organ of the males. One might wonder how a mark in a part of the body that is kept covered ([1 Corinthians 12:23](#)) can be a symbol of anything. Symbols are meant to be seen. In this case, the symbol of the covenant is not to be seen by others, but is a reminder to the covenant keeper himself. As he dedicates the most personal part of his body to the Lord, so also he dedicates his whole life. And through marriage and marital relations, the wife of the covenant keeper is included in this sacred covenant.

## B. Penalty for Disobedience (v. 14)

**14. “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”**

Disobedience to the covenant leads to exclusion from the covenant community. There is a play on words here. To circumcise someone is to cut off a small piece of flesh; refusal to submit to the procedure results in the man’s being *cut off from his people*.

It is not clear what that penalty involves, whether capital punishment or banishment, or whether it is done by God or by a human agent. When Moses started toward Egypt in obedience to God’s call, “the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him”; Moses’ wife quickly circumcised their son, and the Lord “let him alone” ([Exodus 4:24-26](#)). This may suggest that it is God who cuts off the one who fails to keep the covenant. However, no deaths are noted when the entire nation of Israel later fails to circumcise the next generation until after crossing the Jordan ([Joshua 5:2-8](#)). Apparently the cutting off of the covenant breaker is to be a human responsibility.

### RECOMMENDED BUT OPTIONAL?

Muslims consider themselves to be the purest of those who trace their spiritual history to Abraham. They claim lineage through Ishmael, Abraham’s son who was born to Hagar after Abraham and Sarah took it upon themselves to push God’s plan along.

However, Islam (the religion of Muslims) does not view circumcision as mandatory. Instead it is a recommended but optional ritual that is seen to show a Muslim male’s closeness to Abraham as spiritual ancestor and physical forefather.

The Old and New Testaments reveal no such middle-of-the-road stance. Submission to circumcision in the Old Testament was mandatory if one wanted to remain part of the covenant people. The opposite is seen in the New Testament: physical circumcision is strongly advised against (with an exception for practical reasons at [Acts 16:3](#)), since it is part of the old law that is no longer in force.

Instead, the New Testament advocates Jesus’ emphasis on purity of the inner person ([Matthew 15:18](#); etc.). But that brings us full circle back to the Old Testament, where the same emphasis is found. See [Leviticus 26:41](#); [Jeremiah 6:10](#); compare [Acts 7:51](#).

—C. R. B.

## Conclusion

### A. Deal Breaker

In any negotiation, certain factors are known as deal breakers. These are matters that must be satisfied or there is no transaction. In buying a house or car, not having a clear title is a deal breaker. If the seller cannot produce a title without encumbrances (liens, etc.) on the item for sale, then the wise buyer will walk away. The buyer will not accept promises such as, “I’ll send you the title later, once I clear up the tax lien on the property.” Failure to have a clear title in hand is a deal breaker.

Other situations don’t have the same legal concern as a clear title, but they are deal breakers nonetheless. In warm, humid climates, lack of air-conditioning is a deal breaker to many home buyers. For parents, a home in an inferior school district is a deal breaker. These kinds of deal breakers vary from buyer to buyer, but we all have them.



Visual for Lesson 2. Point to this visual as you ask, “Which part of life might a new Christian most try to declare “off-limits” to God? Why?”

For Israel’s covenant with the Lord, to not be circumcised was a deal breaker. Refusal of circumcision meant exclusion. The precise reason circumcision was so important is never stated. But it was indeed critically important—and *that fact was* stated. No Israelite had an excuse for failure in this matter.

Perhaps the reason it was so important was because it had significance beyond itself, beyond even the covenant to which it witnessed. The New Testament calls features of the old covenant “a shadow” of something more substantial to come ([Colossians 2:17](#); [Hebrews 10:1](#)). “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” ([Galatians 5:6](#); compare [6:15](#)).

### B. Prayer

Father, we thank you for the spiritual circumcision that is done to all Christians by your Spirit—the circumcision of the heart. Help us to live in the manner your Word would have us. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Our connection with God can result in intimacy  
greater than any other relationship.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

Before class, write the following phrases on separate index cards: *is a permanent mark / can show affiliation / involves a painful process / is always with a person / can be a constant reminder of a decision made / affirms a commitment.*

To begin class, give six volunteers one of these cards each. Have those holding a card read it aloud, pausing to have the class try to guess what the card refers to. Continue until all clues are read or until someone guesses that the cards refer to tattoos. For extra impact, purchase a pair of false tattoo sleeves, readily available this time of year from party supply stores. Wear them under a jacket and take off the jacket to reveal the answer. Be prepared to respond if someone mentions [Leviticus 19:28](#).

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Vanity Plates” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, ask the class to list other ways people show loyalties, interests, and affiliations. Some possibilities include sports team T-shirts, bumper stickers, displaying a flag, etc. Lead into Bible study by saying, “A person may wave a flag, sport a tattoo, take a pledge, wear a T-shirt, purchase vanity license plates, or show loyalty in any number of other ways. Today we will look at a sign God gave Abraham and his descendants to show their loyalty to God.”

### Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups, giving each group a portion of the Bible text and the opening line that goes with it. Each group should read its portion of the text and create a dramatic monologue that starts with its given opening line.

**Great Promise (Genesis 17:1, 2)**—*I was afraid we really blew it with God. But . . .*

**New Name (Genesis 17:3-8)**—*Talk about a fresh start! We even have new, meaningful names!*

**Personal Mark (Genesis 17:9-14)**—*Aren't signs meant to be seen? But then I understood what God was telling us.*

Allow time for groups to share their monologues and summarize their Scripture assignments.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “God’s Property” activity from the reproducible page. You can do this as a whole-class activity, or assign small groups one of the three sections of text and questions on the sheet.

### Into Life

Say, “God gave the people of Israel a mark that showed that he was keeping his promises to them and that they accepted an intimate relationship with him. What is the equivalent mark for a Christ follower?”

Have a volunteer read aloud [Colossians 2:11-15](#) for your class. After the whole passage is read, have your reader repeat [verses 11, 12](#) slowly. Discuss the connection between spiritual circumcision and physical baptism.

Say, “Pause for a moment and consider your own heart. Christ began this cutting away process when you accepted him as Savior. Thank God for already cutting away certain sins from your life. Then think of one specific sinful act or attitude he still needs to remove from you. During this week pray regularly that God will continue to mark your life with obedience to him in that regard.”

Before class, obtain small heart stickers or temporary tattoos from a party supply or school supply store. Give each class member a sticker or temporary tattoo to take home as a prayer reminder. Challenge your learners to wear it hidden underneath clothing sometime in the week ahead as a personal sign of being in a covenant relationship with Christ. Stress that this is only a devotional memory aid, and not a substitute for biblical directives.