

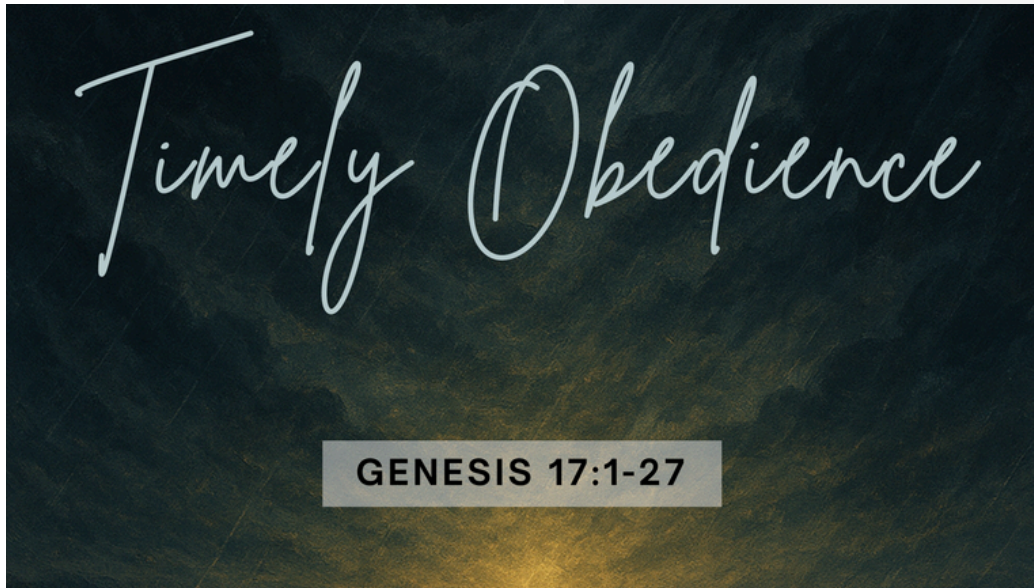
CCLEB SERMON NOTES



SUNDAY AUGUST 17, 2025
GENESIS 17:1-27

PASTOR DUANE MILLER

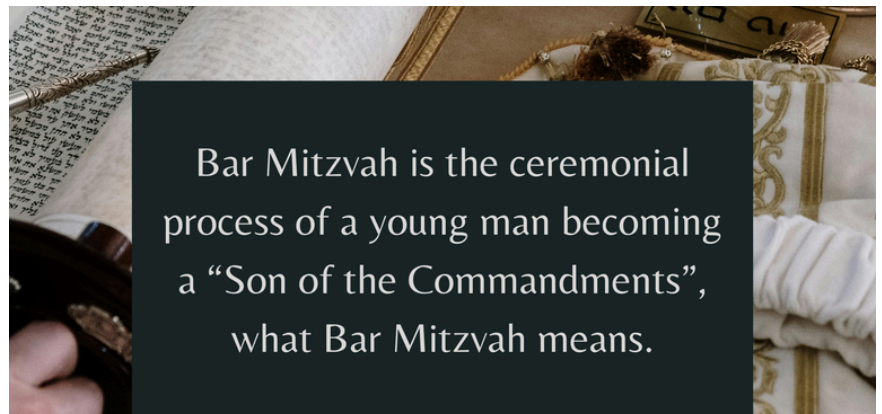
TIMELY OBEDIENCE



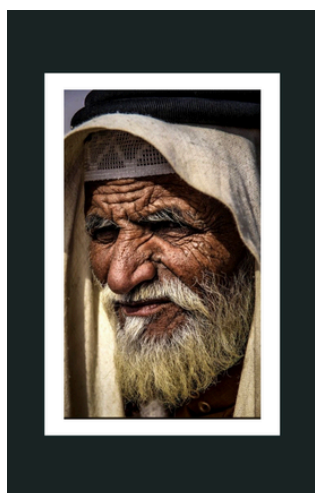
Thirteen years have passed since our last scene in **Genesis 16**. 13 years is a long time, its long enough for a baby to grow up and be a teenager – 13 years. In our prior story, we saw that Hagar the Egyptian slave of Sarai was pregnant with Abram's child. Hagar was in essence a "surrogate womb" for barren Sarai, the wife of Abram. Trusting in a "surrogate womb" was a futile effort by Abram & Sarai to achieve God's blessing – and it didn't end well. When Hagar – the surrogate womb became pregnant by Abram, she despised Sarai and treated Sarai with contempt. Sarai then in turn treated Hagar harshly and Hagar ran away. The angel of the LORD – who is pre-incarnate Jesus – found the runaway pregnant Hagar by a well in the wilderness, told Hagar to humble herself go back and put herself under the heavy hand of affliction from Sarai. Then the LORD blessed Hagar with a blessing on the scale of awesomeness of the blessing Abram received regarding having innumerable descendants. Hagar did humble herself, went back to Sarai, delivered her son Ishmael, and Abram at the age of 86 had a son, but not the son of promise.

Chapter 17 opens up 13 years later when Abram is 99. Thirteen years is a long time. We don't have any record of what happened in that 13 years – nothing about Abram talking with God, God giving instructions, nothing. So why did the LORD wait thirteen years? It seems from the end of **chapter 17** it has to do with Abram's age and Ishmael's age. See **verses 24-25**.

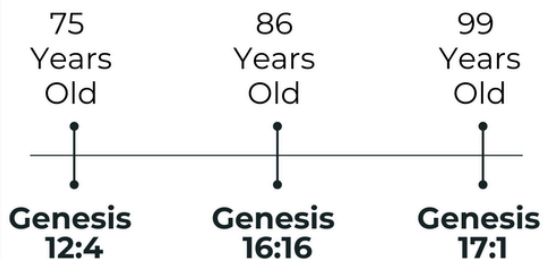
At age 13 – Ishmael was entering puberty- transition to manhood. Jewish tradition was that at the age of 13 a young man was old enough to choose to uphold the Old Testament Law and be responsible for his actions. "Bar Mitzvah" is the ceremonial process of a young man becoming a "Son of the Commandments", what "Bar Mitzvah" means.



[When Ishmael was at that transition age, Abram his father was 99. So at 99 Abram and Sarai had waited 24 years for the LORD to fulfill his promise of descendants. 24 years! Abram was seventy-five in **12:4**, eighty-six in **16:16**, and ninety-nine in **17:1**.



Abram's Age



And at the age of 99 the LORD “appeared” to Abram and in the last verse we read it says “he left...”. This appearance is to be understood as a literal appearance of the LORD, the LORD appearing in a form that was both seen and heard. Do you think 99 year old Abram was startled by that?

And after 24 years of relationship with Abram, the LORD opens the conversation with a new definition of himself in **verse 1**. The LORD says “I am El Shaddai – God Almighty”. Now the origin of this word Shaddai in Hebrew is uncertain. Some suggest the “Shaddai” comes from the Hebrew word “shad” that means “chest or breast” – in which it implies that all life comes from God, and that God is nourisher and sustainer. Others suggest that Shaddai comes from the Hebrew word “shadad” meaning “to overpower” or “destroy”. Either one, and perhaps both, give a comforting foundation for the covenant that the LORD is about to make with Abram. In essence that the LORD is El-Shaddai God Almighty – capable of implementing and sustaining the everlasting covenant.

“I am El Shaddai – “God Almighty”

Now back in **17:1** with the self-definition of El Shaddai – God Almighty given to Abram, the LORD tells Abram to **17:1c NASB** “walk before me and be blameless”. These are the same words that God used to describe Noah’s relationship with the LORD in **Genesis 6:9**. “Blameless” doesn’t mean “sinless” it means “whole, undivided, fully committed”. If I am sitting with my wife and she is talking and I am looking at my phone am I undivided, fully committed? No. So God using the same language for both Noah and Abraham is the LORD saying to Abram “I am God Almighty, I sustained Noah and will sustain you too... so walk with me undivided, fully committed. And the LORD then tells Abram in (**verse 2**) that he will make a covenant with Abram and give Abram countless descendants.

“Blameless” doesn’t means “sinless” it means “whole, undivided, fully committed”



In **verse 2** the LORD is repeating himself especially about “descendants and multiplying” etc. Wasn’t most of this “covenant talk” already told to Abram in previous chapters? So why does God have to say it again? Remember, this is 13 years after Abram and Sarai had used the “surrogate womb” to help God with his promise of an heir. So it suggests that the LORD now appearing to Abram and giving the covenant in even more detail (which we will see) despite Abram and Sarai distrusting God and putting their trust in a surrogate womb is God’s mercy. This is a picture of Jesus... Jesus saying –“I’m going to welcome you into my arms and give you myself even when you have sinned and trusted in other things.”

At this Abram fell on his face (**verse 3**). Falling on your face is an appropriate response to an appearance of the LORD.. To “fall on your face” means respect, humility, worship. To be on one’s face on the ground before the LORD is as physically low as one can make oneself without being dead and in the ground. This physical posture also reflects the posture of the mind and heart.



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And now with Abram in a humble posture of mind and heart, the LORD gives Abram the conditions of the covenant.

In Hebrew one does not make a covenant, one “cuts” a covenant which is what covenant’s root word “berit” means – “to cut”. This is a reference to the cutting of animals in half as we saw in **Genesis 15:2** which is how covenants were ratified.

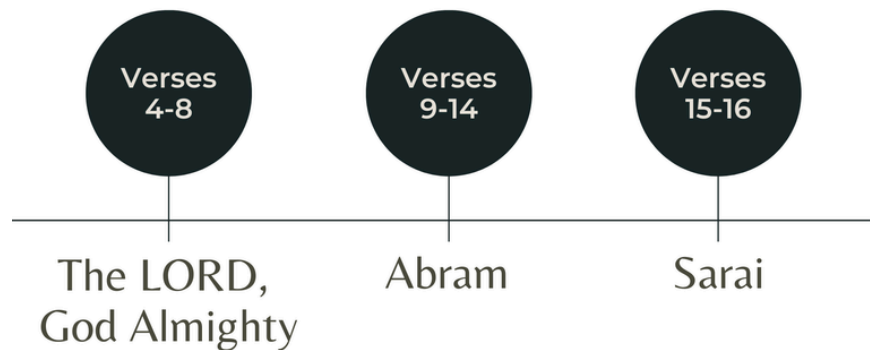
Genesis 15:10 With the animals cut in two halves laid out facing each other, the parties in the covenant would both pass through the halves, walking the trail of blood, ratifying the covenant.



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As I said, covenants are between parties that agree to the stipulations of the covenant. **Verses 4-16** is set up in three sections- **verses 4-8**, **verses 9-15**, **verses 16-17**. One section for each party in the covenant. The parties in the covenant were: 1st - The LORD, God Almighty; 2nd - Abram; 3rd - Sarai. Each of the parties had a roles and responsibilities. And each party of the covenant is given a memorial/symbolic sign.

Three Sections of Genesis 17:4-16



In **verses 4-8** it tells what the LORD's responsibilities were: **Verse 4** The LORD opens with a repeating line to Abram "my covenant is with you and you will be the father of many nations". Now prior, Abram had been simply Abram - "exalted father of many", but now God changes his name to Abraham, the "exalted father of a multitude of nations!" [Just for fun, the Hebrew word for "many or multitude literally means "noisy crowd".. as in a crowd that is large enough to be noisy. So put a bunch of nations together and it's really noisy.]



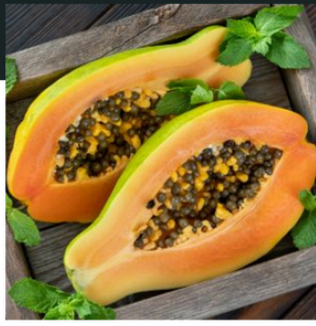
Abraham

exalted father of a
multitude of nations

To be given a new name in ancient times had to do with belonging, endearment and purpose. "Belonging" as in now Abraham is clearly set aside for the LORD. "Endearment" as in it's a personal name given to Abram in affection like calling your wife "honey", a term of endearment. And "purpose": the name tells what Abram is/ what Abram will become - the Father of a many nations.

[We have seen other places where the LORD changes someone's name in the bible: For example "Jacob" - which means "heel grabber/usurper" became "Israel" - "God is my judge". "Simon" became "Peter" - meaning "the rock on which Jesus built his church". And this divine renaming only happens six times total in the bible - two of them are Abram and Sarai. If you know the other two not mentioned write their names...]

In God Almighty continues by telling Abraham that God will make Abram "extremely fruitful" - which is the same blessing the LORD gave Adam & Eve in **Genesis 1:28**. This means than the LORD's blessing to Adam & Eve of "fruitfulness" will now be carried out through Abraham and his descendants. And what ties this all together is that the word for descendants is literally "seed" as in "seed of the fruit", "seed of the fruit" that exponentially produces more seed for more fruit. That is how the "extremely fruitful" part of the blessing happens.



“Descendants” is literally “seed” as in “seed of the fruit”, “seed of the fruit” that exponentially produces more “seed” for more fruit.

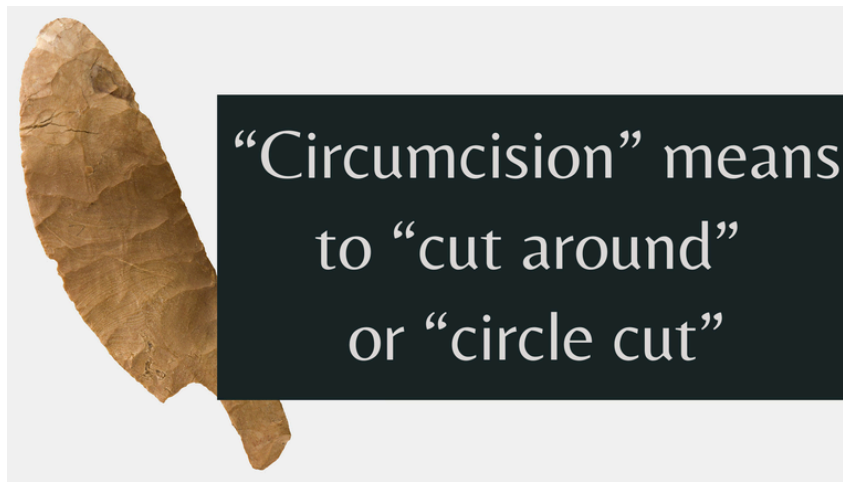
And of Abraham’s descendants or seed it says in the end of **verse 6** that kings will come from him. So not just descendants in many nations but kings as well. It’s interesting that descendants as kings was added to the blessing. When we go to the genealogy of Jesus in **Matthew 1:1** it references this prophecy about Jesus as one of those kings mentioned in **Genesis 17:6**. Matthew’s writing of Jesus portrays Jesus as the promised Messiah / King.

And not only will Abraham have descendants as kings, the covenant from God also promises in **verses 7-8** that the covenant is everlasting, and the possession of the land is everlasting . An everlasting covenant is not new to Genesis. In **Genesis 9:16 NASB** we saw God give Noah an everlasting covenant memorialized by the rainbow. Imagine the comfort for Abraham of knowing that from the very mouth of God Almighty comes a binding covenant that is everlasting. When life is turbulent, when life is shaking, when life is shaken by one’s own choices and sins, what else does one cling to but the words that come from the mouth of Almighty God?

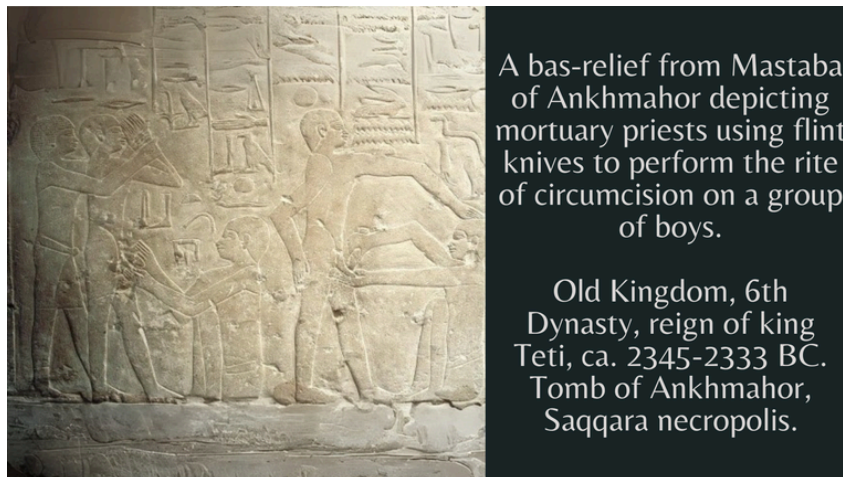
Verses 4-8 listed what God’s responsibilities in the covenant – now **verses 9-14** lists what Abraham’s responsibilities in the covenant are. God Almighty says to Abraham and all his descendants in **verse 9**, “your responsibility is to obey the covenant”. That’s pretty clear. In Hebrew the word “shamar” is much broader than just “obey” – it means to “guard and protect, to watch over, and live according to.” So not only are they to obey the law but they are the “keepers” of the law as well. I imagine this notion of “keeping/guarding” has fueled much of the zealousness for God’s law in biblical history.

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Then God continues **verse 10-11** to tell Abraham what Abraham must do – and this is the sign or memorial symbol of the covenant – circumcision of the foreskin. Men – if you involuntarily winced at this part of the story - I’m with you. “Circumcision” means to “cut around” or “circle cut”.



Circumcision was not a new practice in Abraham’s times. There is archeological evidence of this in Egypt. A bas-relief from Mastaba of Ankhmahor depicting mortuary priests using flint knives to perform the rite of circumcision on a group of boys. (Old Kingdom, 6th Dynasty, reign of king Teti, ca. 2345-2333 BC. Tomb of Ankhmahor, Saqqara necropolis). If this story of God telling Abraham to circumcise himself and all his descendants is new to you, I can imagine that it brings up a few questions like – “What type of God would require cutting off your foreskin as a requirement of the relationship?” There is that! While I can’t claim to understand this contractual arrangement totally – here is what I do know.



The word “covenant” again is from root word “berit” meaning to cut. As in the ceremonial actions of cutting animals in half.. Hence one “cuts a covenant”. “Circumcision” also means to “cut” as in to “cut around” or “cut off”. Why would God demand that? The reason God gives for this cutting off requirement is in the end of **verse 13b**. Other translations say “My covenant shall be in your flesh”. Now my response to the LORD at that point would be “can we compromise with just cutting off a mole?”

So here are some suggested reasons for this circumcision sign:

1. Bearing the mark of the covenant in your body, or flesh meant that the mark or sign of the covenant is permanent as long as ones’ flesh is alive – it meant one always bears the sign.
2. Commentator Guzik adds “Because circumcision deals with the organ of procreation, it was a reminder of the special seed of Abraham, which would ultimately bring the Messiah.”
3. And given that flesh is what often drives us to disobey God and not keep his instructions, and given that in the flesh we often try to please God and win his approval, cutting off of the flesh is an appropriate sign.

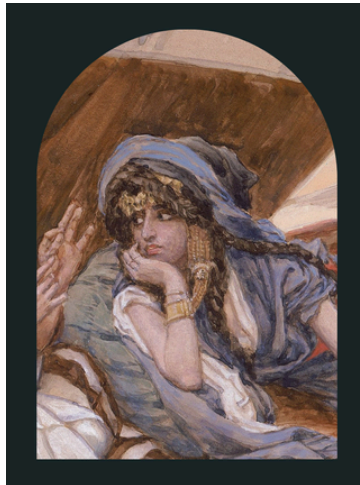
These circumcision concepts are captured well in the New Testament relating the new covenant that Jesus offers. **Colossians 2:11** also **Philippians 3:3** Meaning that we cannot trust in our flesh to win God’s approval. How do we gain God’s approval? **Genesis 15:6**

Now back in **Genesis 17** we see in **verse 14** that the God Almighty also adds to the covenant what happens when one fails to accept the sign of the covenant.. meaning refuses to be circumcised. Note here in the clever play on words. The three words high lighted all carry the meaning of to cut in some regard. Here is my interpretation of **verse 14**. "If one does not undergo the circumcision cut, which is the sign of my covenant (cut), they will undergo the community cut" (**Genesis 17:14 DM**).

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Being cut off from the people meant social, religious and economic exclusion! That was a big deal in a strong community based Jewish culture. This became even bigger through history until the time of Jesus. Religious leaders at the time of Jesus used a similar threat to control the thinking and actions of the people. **John 9:22**. With all this detail of the covenant in **verses 4-16** it is clear that this covenant is a "cut above the rest".

Verses 15-16 then deal with the third party in the covenant, Sarai. Here God Almighty changes Sarai's name from "Sarai", meaning "my princess" to "Sarah" meaning "princess or ruler of many". While this name change may appear insignificant in scale, consider that it is through Sarah that God Almighty shows Abraham and Sarah and everyone around them, and everyone after them, and every bible reader from that point on, that God Almighty alone can fulfill the promise. And what is the sign that Abraham will have a son through Sarai? Her name change to Sarah - "princess of many".



God Almighty changes
Sarai's name from "Sarai",
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or "ruler of many"

Up to this point in Abraham hearing the covenant from the LORD we don't have any reaction by Abraham recorded. Nothing. However after Abraham heard about having a child through 90 year old Sarah we see **verse 17** that Abraham reacts by once again falling on his face, but this time laughing.

I say once again falling on his face because that is what Abraham did in **17:3 NASB** when the LORD appeared. There is much much debate whether his laughter was worshipful joy as in the laughter of rejoicing, perhaps even surprised wonder? Or Abraham's laughter was incredulous - doubtful - sarcastic laughter?

The famous ancient Jewish commentator Rashi said it was the laughter of rejoicing. Two reasons are: in **(verse 17)** Abraham falls on his face which is a position of respect, and honor and worship. That is what we saw Abram do in **verse 3**, exact same phrase. And second reason, there is not a divine disapproval of Abraham's laughter by God, as there was of Sarah's laughter in **Genesis 18:13** – next week's lesson. So I see Abraham's laughter as faith-filled rejoicing.



The Jewish commentator Rashi said, “Abraham's laughter was the laughter of rejoicing.”

In **(verse 18)** we then see Abraham being a good father and wanting his firstborn son of the slave Hagar to also have God's blessing. Abraham is essentially asking “If only Ishmael could live under your blessing and in right standing with you?”.

God responds clearly and strongly to Abraham's request in **(verse 19)** repeating that Abraham will have a son through Sarah, and God added that the son's name will be “Isaac”. Isaac comes from the same word as “he laughed” regarding Abraham falling on his face in laughter.

I am particularly fond of this name Isaac as it is the name of my grandson Isaac... who brings us much joy and laughter!

And in **(verse 20)** we see God Almighty, hear Abraham's heart for his son. This is a beautiful quality of God. Abraham wants what is best for Ishmael his first born, and God in response restates part of the blessing he gave to Hagar about Ishmael from **(16:10)**.. including as well that in Ishmael's lineage there will also be royalty – 12 princes, which we know comes to fulfillment in **Genesis 25:12-16**.

But note God is very clear – that the blessing that God told Abraham in the covenant back in **verses 4-8** about an everlasting covenant, and everlasting land possession, and prophecy of the messiah king - will only happen thru the lineage of Isaac.

In **verse 21** God Almighty not only tells Abraham that he will have a son through Sarai but now tells Abraham when that is going to happen. Abraham had waited at this point 24 years since God told Abraham he would be a great nation (**Genesis 12:2**) and now at the age of 99 it was finally going to happen.

Immediately after saying that God Almighty left Abraham...he departed.

[Let me summarize **verses 1-22** to help us understand the next five verses of the chapter. The LORD appeared to Abram – introduced himself to Abram with a self-definition of El Shaddai – God Almighty – the one that has the power to sustain Abram. The God instructed Abram to “walk with God and be blameless” – undivided fully committed. A tall but doable order. God then proceeds to outline the conditions or requirements of the covenant for all three parties, Himself, Abraham, and Sarai. Abraham's responsibility was to accept the sign of the covenant circumcision for himself and all his descendants. This permanent mark -circumcision of the flesh - was Abraham in a way acknowledging that he could not trust the flesh, nor would he ever be able to please God by the works of the flesh. And after that then God departed.]

God departing means that Abraham has to make a choice. Abraham either trusts God and obeys His voice and acts on the covenant requirement of circumcision, or Abraham walks from it. **Verse 23 -27** tell us what he did.

Verse 23 says “that very day”. Not after I fix my marriage, not after my spouse changes, not after I clean up my life, not after I feel better about myself, ... the text says “that very day”.

Verses 23-27. Obedience sometimes costs you dearly.

Let me give you some closing thoughts for your meditation and application before the LORD.

1. The God we worship is “El Shaddai – God Almighty” “He sustained Noah and Abraham will sustain you too... both were to walk with God and be blameless- meaning undivided - fully committed.
2. Abraham was told that God Almighty’s words were everlasting. When life is turbulent, when life is shaking, when life is shaken by one’s own choices and sins, what else can one cling to but the words that come from the mouth of Almighty God?
4. What does radical obedience look like? What if we as a church family love our neighbors – radically? What if we care for the widows, orphans and foreigners, radically? What if we gave of our resources, radically?

SUPPLEMENTAL

NOTES:

1. Now it's interesting **Exodus 6:3** tells us that God did not reveal himself to Abram as LORD – YHWH – which is God's covenantal name given much later on Mount Sinai. Rather God reveals himself to Abram just as "El Shaddai- God Almighty". Perhaps this is an indication that there is a greater covenant than Abram's yet to come?
2. "**Everlasting**". In ancient Hebrew thinking "everlasting" meant "hidden from sight" ... so in **17:7-8** one looks to the future and can't see the covenant's end – i.e. thus its everlasting.
3. **How does circumcision as a sign of the covenant differ from ancient Egypt?** What is different for Abraham and his descendants is that God is demanding it be done moving forward eight days after birth, not at the age of puberty as was practiced in Egypt.

SUPPLEMENTAL

NOTES:

16:13 Imagine Hagar hearing all the hard things about Ishmael. I wonder how Hagar processed hearing all of these things said about her son Ishmael. Where Mary the mother of Jesus pondered in her heart all the amazing things that were said about her son Jesus, there is no indication in the text that Hagar was affected by anything she heard about her son.