

## READ

---

Genesis 17

## REFLECT

---

Promises and covenants are a common theme throughout Genesis. Genesis 17 is sixth chapter of the Abram story, yet it's the third time that God has made a promise to Abram about many descendants and the second covenant cut. It's this covenant that is remembered most; whereas the covenant in chapter 15 had no precondition, other than sacrificing a few animals, this one is a bit more onerous. The easy part was an identity change for both Abram and Sarai – they were from then on to be known as Abraham and Sarah. But then there was a physical symbol that all men had to carry to be “in” the covenant, circumcision. It'd be a hard sell, but oddly the circumcision requirement wasn't what Abraham had a hard time with. By this time Abraham is 99 years old, so he was hung up on his age. How on earth could he, at 99, get his wife pregnant, especially because she wasn't much younger? Abraham responded to God's promise with laughter and then begged God to just accept Ishmael as his heir. God refused, saying once again that he would have a son and now telling him to name him Isaac, which means “he laughs” – a clear response to the laughter of Abraham at hearing he'd father a child at 99 – and also telling Abraham how Ishmael would fare, but that the covenant promise would go through Isaac's line and that he would be born the next year. And then God left him, not allowing Abraham to have the final word. Abraham did the only thing he could do at that point, which was to do as God said. He gathered every male in his household, from Ishmael to servants and everyone in between, and he circumcised them, giving them the mark of the covenant. In our world, where circumcision is common, but performed in sterile medical settings and usually to newborn infants, it doesn't seem so bad. But this was a procedure performed on adults (and teenagers) in an unclean environment without the benefit of pain relievers – so it was not a pleasant experience at all. But they did it, proving their trust in God's promise.

## REACT

---

- Have you ever considered just how many times promises are made and covenants cut in Genesis? Why do you think it's so important to remember that God has made promises to our ancestors (and to us, by our relation to them)?
- How do you understand Abraham and Sarah's becoming parents so late in life? Some have said that ages were counted differently in Genesis, others maintain that the ages were symbolic, and other still claim that they must be read literally. How do you feel? Why?
- One of the oft neglected points of this covenant is that God also promised to care for Ishmael. Just like, in the previous chapter, God promised to care for Hagar, we see again that God casts a very wide net of care. Just because he wasn't the focus of the covenant doesn't mean God didn't see him and love him. How might we still recognize and love those we don't traditionally identify with?

## RESPOND

---

Tangible signs of the promise: *Abraham and all the males in his household underwent circumcision as a physical sign of their commitment to upholding their end of God's promise. It was more than just a mark on their bodies, it was orienting your whole way of life around living into God's promises. Having a tangible reminder can be helpful, even if it's not something as personal (and painful) as circumcision. What can you use as a reminder of God's promises to you and your promises to God? Like a wedding ring for married couples, is there a physical reminder of your relationship with God that you can keep with you at all times? Consider what that might be, and try keeping it with you for the week. Do you notice a deeper connection to your faith when you keep it around and remind yourself why you carry it?*