

Genesis 17 An outward sign Romans 4:6-12

1. God has promised Abram much, but the fulfilment of these promises takes a long time. There already was a covenant between God and Abram, but God now adds an outward sign, circumcision. And Ishmael is already there, but God does not acknowledge him as heir to the promise. So it's no Fathers' Day yet for Abram. But this time God sets a time: within a year a son, to be called Isaak, will be born to Abraham and Sarah (vs. 21).
2. Once again we see that Abraham is an ordinary man whose faith is not always strong (vs. 17-18) – which is so encouraging to us! Abraham is old, disappointed, and shows a weak faith. Sarah is just like that.

God accepts them as they are — but He has his way. He calls Himself 'Almighty'. That's the key: the promise is fulfilled not because of strong human faith but because of who God is. It is still the same in our time: God does not depend on our faith.

3. Abraham has a difficult path to travel. We have our problems too. God sometimes disappoints us. Sometimes that is because our expectations are wrong. Sometimes we get in his way. Sometimes we are unrealistic: God does not promise us material riches and health. But when God promises us something, He does it.
4. And then there is circumcision. God adds it to the covenant as the visible sign of the covenant between Him and Abraham. Circumcision is thus an act of human obedience. God required it. But in the New Testament it does not return. No more circumcision, says Paul at the meeting in Acts 15 and in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. It is only for Jews.
5. So we don't circumcise our baby boys, but we do have other outward signs. Is having an external sign still important? Isn't it just about the heart? Apparently, the Lord thinks it is important to help people remember that they belong to Him. Just like a marriage between two people, who of course have known for a while that they belong together; they even exchange rings as a token. We need external signs. They serve not for our salvation but for strengthening our faith. It is great for a congregation to witness a baptism.

Publicly professing your faith, baptism (once), communion (often), marriage (as and when) — they are the signs that remind us that we belong to God and that He loves us. They are not goals in themselves, but they support us along the way to keep us close to God.

God gives us 'points of support' to strengthen our faith. Let us use them!