



Part 40 – The Covenant Sign (2)

Genesis 17:9-14

1. What the sign does

a) The sign is God's pledge to his people.

- The sign of the covenant was a form of proclamation in that it served as a physical means for God to declare his promise. Circumcision was not the recipient's pledge to God. It was something they received, not something they did. This

principle is seen in the fact that the people were to give the sign to their infant sons. Those infants were not yet able to believe or make any commitments. But they would bear on their bodies a sign of God's promise from infancy.

b) The sign signifies the removal of the sinful flesh.

- The sign of circumcision involved the shedding of blood and the removal of flesh which symbolized the removing of sin. It reminded the people that the remission of sin required the shedding of blood.

c) The sign signifies inclusion into the visible company of God's people.

- Circumcision functioned as the formal initiation rite into the company of God's people. It could not reveal the heart but at least outwardly those who received the sign were included as members of God's covenant people. And again, this privilege was extended to children in infancy.

2. What the sign does not do

a) The sign does not remove actual sin.

- The sign signifies the removal of sin but the sign on its own does not actually accomplish this. Without being joined to faith, the sign accomplishes nothing.

b) The sign does not guarantee one's inclusion in the spiritual fellowship of God's people.

- Because circumcision could not change the heart, unless it was accompanied by faith, it could not actually make one a member of God's people beyond simply receiving some of the outward benefits. As Paul later explained to the church at Rome who were wondering why so many Jews had rejected Jesus:

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (**Romans 9:6-8**).

3. Who receives the sign?

a) Male believers

- Circumcision was a sign unique for males. But women bore the sign representatively through the principle of headship. That is, while women did not physically carry the sign of circumcision, the blessings of the sign were conferred to them through the principle of representative headship. A wife bore the benefits of her husband's circumcision; a daughter bore the blessings through her father.

b) The children of believers

- After receiving the sign himself, Abraham was commanded to place the sign upon Ishmael and all the males of his household. When Isaac was born, Abraham was commanded to circumcise him on the eighth day which remained the practice for God's people until Christ, by his atoning work on the cross, changed the sign to baptism.
- Why did God command that Israel circumcise the male infants? The question has at least three answers: 1) Because the sign marked them as Israel from birth, 2) The sign would "proclaim" God's covenant to them their entire lives, and 3) Receiving the sign as infants drove home the message of grace that God claims us in our total helplessness.

4. One covenant, two signs

a) Baptism corresponds to and fulfills circumcision

- The covenant of grace that God announced in Genesis 3:15 and first ratified with Abraham is the same covenant fulfilled by Jesus Christ and under which he saves his people. Throughout the generations the substance of the covenant of grace has not changed. It promises salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And while the sign of the covenant has appropriately changed from circumcision to baptism (**Matthew 28:19**), everything we have said about circumcision we can say about baptism (**Colossians 2:11-15**).

b) Baptism and church membership

- Just as circumcision was the sign of inclusion into Israel, so now baptism is the sign of inclusion in the church. And just as one's inclusion in the visible company of Israel did not guarantee faith and perseverance so too in the church. The fact remains that some who profess faith, receive baptism and become members of the visible church nevertheless forsake Christ and prove themselves to be outside of the spiritual union of the saints ("invisible church"). This is what the various 'warning passages of Hebrews refers to (**2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29**).

c) Who receives baptism?

- Because the substance of the covenant of grace has never changed, it makes sense that God never rescinded his command for believers to place the sign upon their children. At Pentecost, the Apostle Peter preached Genesis 17 ("For **the promise** is for you and your children..."). The Book of Acts records several household baptisms in which the entire household received the covenant sign once the head of household believed.

A Word to Parents of Prodigals:

A) Move toward relationship

- You will serve no good end if you vent anger at your wayward child or if you seek to heap guilt upon your wayward child, or if you refuse to enter into difficult conversations with your wayward child. Moving toward relationship does not mean walking on egg shells when you're with your wandering child. It does not mean avoiding any uncomfortable conversations. It means moving into those conversations but doing it without anger and bitterness. It means taking the risk of your son or daughter being angry with you for the time being not because you behaved like a jerk but because you insist on moving toward them not away from them.

B) Don't adjust the truth.

- Never change adjust or ignore the truth in order to suit the child's changing beliefs. Compromising God's truth to suit your prodigal is never the loving the thing to do. Indeed, there is no conflict between upholding the truth and loving your child. The two are in harmony. At the same time never let the ways in which you communicate the truth be an unnecessary stumbling block nor let your manner of life be a contradiction to the truth.

C) Keep praying

- May we be encouraged by Jesus' parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus assures us that God will never be unjust and such will be revealed at the end of the age. The question Jesus poses is not whether God will be just. Rather he asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" God will not be unjust. The question is, will we have faith?

D) Remain hopeful

- When it comes to loving a prodigal, we must have the long view. How many faithful, persevering Christians went through a time – often lasting years – living in the far country? Perhaps you spent time (years?) far away from God. But God drew you; pursued you, hounded you until you came to your senses, repented and returned to your Father's house. We cannot know the mystery of God's providence for each and every child born to believing homes. But the church is filled with a multitude of former prodigals.