

CIRCUMCISION

(Genesis 17) We last looked at chapter 17 and the most complete statement given on the covenant which God established with his man Abraham. Last time together we looked at God's covenant commitments - His commitment to give Abraham a great family and a great land and a great name. We also considered the callings of the covenant, those things which God expected of Abraham. And then too we saw the child of the covenant, and the promised birth of Isaac to Sarah. All of that was found in chapter 17, verses 1-8 and 15-21. What we did not cover last time was the portion, 11 verses, of this chapter dealing with circumcision which is not a popular theme for sermons. But, we are going there. **17:9-14** *God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. 13 A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."* **22-27** *When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. 23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. 24 Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26 In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. 27 All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.*

Two little boys were sitting next to each other in a doctor's office waiting room. One looks at the other and asks him, "Hey, what you in here for?" He says, "I'm getting circumcised."

“Ooh that’s rough,” said the first kid. “I had that done when I first arrived and I couldn’t walk for a year.” And that will conclude my remarks relative to the medical and logistical issues surrounding this procedure. It seems extremely odd that such a thing would become the topic for serious students of theology. But the spiritual and religious implications of what God commanded Abraham are many. We will divide our thoughts three-ways and begin with the simple consideration of what circumcision is. We will not be using any visual aids. I am going to assume you understand the general idea of the medical procedure, and so will talk only about what it is that makes it significant to us. And the answer to that is supplied in verse 11. *It shall be the sign of the covenant* ®. That is what circumcision really is. A sign. And a sign, by its very nature, is intended to draw attention not to itself but to something else. When you drive down the highway and see one of those large yellow signs advertising Cracker Barrel you understand what it means - that somewhere near that sign is a restaurant with biscuits and gravy - and a country store where you can purchase sweet-smelling things, and even a big-mouth billy bass that sings, “Don’t worry, be happy.” The sign is not the store, but it points you to the store, gains attention for the store, and is therefore quite valuable to the owner and the customer.

It would seem to us ludicrous for someone to mistake the sign and the store, to somehow park their car next to the sign in hopes that a hostess would appear to offer a table. If you are hungry you don’t want food signs, you want food. If you need a doctor you don’t want signs for hospitals, you want to see a person. The signs are only valuable as pointers, but amazingly, within the religious world we find many who have come to place their hope and confidence in the sign rather than the reality to which they point. Some trust in their circumcision. Some trust in their baptism. Some in the holy communion. But these are all signs and signs must always be distinguished from the reality they represent. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes you will find a restaurant with no sign. Sign or no, the biscuits will be just as filling. At other times, you will find a sign, but no restaurant. Nothing good at all comes from that. From that you have only frustration and deception. Signs find their value and purpose only in the reality to which they point. Got that? That is what circumcision is called because that is what it does.

In the Scriptures, both old and new, God supplies us with visible, tangible signs which represent and point us to invisible, intangible realities. These are sometimes referred to as *sacraments*. In the New Testament, we have the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

These signs point the believing heart to the real spiritual feeding on the body of Christ, to the genuine and powerful washing away of sin by the Holy Spirit. The Scripture speaks, for instance, of two baptisms - baptism by water is one. What is the other? Baptism by the Holy Spirit. One is the sign, the other the reality to which it points. Water then is a symbol of God's cleansing gift of the Spirit. It is the visible which preaches a sermon to the eyes about what God does by His Spirit in our hearts. There is the physical baptism and the spiritual baptism. The same is true with circumcision. Several passages of Scripture make this obvious. In Deuteronomy 10 Moses is preaching to the people **15-16** *Yet on your fathers did the Lord set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.* You see that? Here Moses uses what could be viewed as an absurd physical depiction. Circumcise your heart? Jeremiah does it too. Jeremiah 4:**4ab** *Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart.* What can that mean? That is like saying, comb your elbow. It only makes sense if you recognize there to be a spiritual circumcision. Which there is. It is the internal reality to which the external sign points.

This carries us to our next major heading which asks the question, "what does circumcision mean?" We see that it is a sign. What is the reality to which it points? And as I answer that I want you to begin to see how circumcision parallels in meaning the ordinance of water baptism. Indeed, it is our understanding as Presbyterians that even as the Old Testament Passover gave way to our New Testament Lord's Supper, so Old Testament circumcision gave way to New Testament baptism. Their function, their meaning and their symbolism are all the same. What I say here of circumcision we could say equally well of baptism. We begin with the proposition that circumcision is a symbol of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit. Colossians 2 clearly connects baptism and circumcision and says this in verse **11** (NIV) *In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ.* And what is that circumcision? The putting off of the sinful nature. Circumcision, like baptism, is a cleansing ritual. The removal of flesh from the male organ represents the removal of sin from the heart. And what does such a circumcision of heart produce in a life? Deuteronomy 30:**6** *Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all*

your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live. Spiritual circumcision produces a cleansing of soul. Was it possible to be spiritually circumcised and not physically so? Yes. Which counts most, the internal or the external? What counts most is what is within. Romans 2:**28-29** *For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.* I don't see how it could be much clearer. You could easily take out the word "circumcision" and put in "baptism." *"He is not a christian who is one outwardly; neither is baptism that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Christian who is one inwardly, and baptism is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit."* Like baptism, circumcision is a rite of symbolic cleansing setting visibly before us the purifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we should see that circumcision is an initiation into the covenant community. It symbolizes cleaning and inclusion. This is the role baptism plays in the church. And that same role was given by God to circumcision under the old covenant. If an uncircumcised person wanted to take part in the worship or communal life of Israel he and his sons had to be circumcised. Exodus 12:**48** *if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.* Because the Passover, like the Lord's Supper, is for God's people only. Circumcision was the ceremony of inclusion into that covenant people.

Thirdly, we see that circumcision, just like baptism, is an indication of one's faith. Speaking of Abraham Romans 4:**11ab** *he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.* So then, what does circumcision symbolize and what does it mean? It means cleansing, inclusion, faith.

Now go back to Genesis 17. Having seen what circumcision is and what it means, we are ready now to see who it is for. And I have three answers to that question. First of all, we see it is for believers and their children. ® The command applied first to Abraham, the believer, and then beyond him to his children. **10-12a** *This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant*

between Me and you. 12 And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised

For those familiar with Scripture this should not be a surprise. As we read the Old Testament we how God saves Noah from the flood. Genesis 6:8 says that Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. But when the ark sailed was it loaded with only Noah and the animals? No. God saved also Noah's family. When the angels took Lot out of Sodom they came for Lot and his family. When God established a covenant with David it was again, a covenant pertaining to David and his descendants after him. The point I'm making, which can hardly be challenged, is that, throughout Scripture, we see God working His grace and judgment through families. In the USA where we are so proud of our independence and individualism it is hard for us to see this point from Scripture but it is there. We see the world in ones. God sees it in families.

Remember Exodus 12:**48ab** *if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it.* If you wanted to join the Old Testament people of God you had to get all the males in your family circumcised because God works with families. Is it different in the New Testament? Not a single verse implies any change in this. Many verses in fact, imply the continuity of the principle. We'll just look at one. I Corinthians 7:**14** (ESV) *For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* What does that mean?

Normally when we hear the word "sanctify" we think in terms of personal, moral purity. That is not what it's about here. Paul is talking here about a positional holiness or sanctification. The term means "set apart." In the Old Testament certain things were sprinkled and set apart as holy for use in the tabernacle. It is this idea of being special, of having a certain relationship to God which others do not have. That is what it means for children of believers to be holy. In some way, God looks at the child of a believer differently and so should we. I heard a Baptist pastor say: "until my kids show evidence of true repentance and faith I regard them as children of the devil." That, of course, would be the proper perspective were it not for this principle I am putting forth to you now. But when I read I Corinthians 7:14 and the Old Testament I gain a sense that the children of any believing adult are not to be viewed as outsiders, but as one of us. The covenant and its privileges belong to our children and so they receive the covenant sign. Children of unbelievers are not given the sign. They are not perceived as holy. Call it unfair if

you like but this is the way God sees it. It is not our place to question his plan but to secure for our children all the benefits that are theirs. They, by virtue of having believing parents, are part of the church, they are regarded by God, not as unclean, but as holy and therefore, the sign of purity, circumcision or baptism, is applied to them as well as their believing parents.

Yes, I have begun to draw in the implications for this to our own practice of covenant baptism. The reason we Presbyterians baptize our children is founded on our text in Genesis. You see, if the New Testament contained either a clear command to baptize infants or a clear prohibition we would hopefully have no disagreement within the churches. Furthermore, I would not bother going back to the Old Testament for understanding. But, the fact is that there is neither command nor prohibition in the New Testament, which leads me to conclude that something was being assumed about the relationship of infants to the covenant sign that we need to get a hold of. One man arguing against infant baptism said, "I know that no authority is found in the Bible for infant baptism for I have read it from Matthew to Revelation." A lot of weak teaching in the church today results from reading the Bible only from Matthew to Revelation. Some go about the work of New Testament interpretation without reference to its Old Testament foundations. In Genesis 17 God is establishing His merciful covenant with Abraham. You know Abraham, the father of all who believe, the one to whose example Paul appealed when arguing that we are justified by faith in Christ alone. And in setting forth the sign of the covenant, the sign of cleansing and inclusion and faith, God says to apply it to babies. Does that mean that they were to give the symbol of the Spirit's work to babies? Does that mean that they were to give the initiation rite into the Covenant community to babies? Does that mean that they were to give the sign of faith to babies? To little babies who had no choice in the matter, who couldn't understand what was going on? Yes (RR). This was the practice of Israel for centuries because it was the commandment of God. And it is because of this that the silence of the New Testament as to the relationship of infants to the covenant sign does not argue against infant baptism but for it since the New Testament came into a context of Old Testament Judaism which would have assumed that the covenant sign would be applied to their children. In light of the command of God to Abraham and the clear correlation of baptism to circumcision the burden of proof falls to my Baptist brother who must give me clear evidence that baptism is not for children. But there is no such evidence. If the New Testament

said nothing, that would, to an Old Testament Jew, argue thunderously in favor of infant baptism. Furthermore, every common objection to infant baptism, like *but the child isn't aware*, or *the child needs to decide for himself*, would also apply to infant circumcision and would therefore put the objector at odds with the God of Abraham.

Now, I am just scratching the surface on the Biblical rationale for baptizing the children of believers. Suffice it to say that we believe it is a practice according to Scripture, that flows out of Genesis 17, and is relevant to every parent here. If I have succeeded in making you want to learn more that's great. I urge you to listen online to the full message on the Case for Covenant Baptism which you can find on our website under member resources.

But we need to move on to see that not only does God call for the circumcision of children but also for that of the household servants. 12-13a *every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. 13 A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised.* In those days the slaves and servants attached to a household were considered part of that household. And the benefits of having a covenant home fell upon the servants as well as the children. Now, how does that relate to us today? For most of us it doesn't at all because we have no household servant. You can't go bringing your lawn guy in here for baptism, much less for circumcision. But it does speak to the issue of adoption and age. Adopted children regardless of their age are, by their adoption, brought into a covenant home and should receive the covenant sign.

Finally, we see that the covenant sign of circumcision was for all the male members of covenant families. For all of them. None should be excluded. 14 *an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.*" I read that just to say that circumcision was not and baptism is not optional. It is required of discipleship. It is required by the covenantal conditions. Exodus chapter 4 contains a strange story of how God threatened to kill Moses. We aren't told why, but the solution to the problem was that Zipporah, the wife of Moses, circumcised their son and, after that, everything was okay. It appears that the Lord was angry with Moses because his son, born to a foreign woman, not Hebrew, was not circumcised. God took that omission very seriously. The sign is just a sign, not the substance, but the Lord doesn't make the sign optional

for us. It is not a prerequisite of salvation. In Romans 4 Paul points out that Abraham was declared just before God back in Genesis 15, before circumcision. It is not a prerequisite for salvation, but it is a post-requisite. God requires of Abraham and his men that they be circumcised. He requires of the followers of Jesus that we be baptized, and although it is not necessary to be saved, it is still a moral and spiritual obligation. Don't neglect it - not for yourself, not for your children. Baptism, like circumcision, is the symbol of our cleansing, our inclusion and our faith. If you have not done so, as a Christian adult, or as a parent, I would love to speak with you about next-step obedience to the word of God.