

The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Recap from the Previous Lesson

- a. When an old man and childless, Abraham was told by God that he would have countless descendants, 'like the stars in the heavens'. Abraham believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness. Paul says in **Romans** and **Galatians** that this foreshadowed our situation: the righteous are justified through faith (rather than through obeying the Law of Moses).
- b. Abraham's was justified through faith when he believed God. At the same time, **James 2** explains that his faith was made complete through what he did, his works, when he later obeyed God's command to sacrifice Isaac.
- c. God told Abraham that his descendants would return to inherit Canaan, after being afflicted in another land for 400 years. He confirmed that by providing a strange night-time display in which a smoking oven and fire moved down a corridor between the halves of dead animals. That unusual display may have foreshadowed the Exodus.

II. Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17:1-14)

- a. Read **Genesis 17:1-14**.
- b. Great covenant promises made to Abraham:
 - i. Abraham will be the father of many nations
 - ii. Name changed from 'Abram' (exalted father) to 'Abraham' (father of many).
 - iii. Kings shall come from Abraham (**Genesis 17:6**, a prophecy regarding king/kingdom that would come in the future).
 - iv. Canaan promised as an everlasting possession.
- c. Sign of the covenant: circumcise each male child.
 - i. The Lord said this was to be an "everlasting covenant"; those who are not circumcised in the flesh are to be "cut off" from their people!
 - ii. All must be circumcised *on the eighth day*. (Wonder why so specific?)
 - iii. Jesus talks about this in **John 7:21-24**, where the Jews will circumcise on the 8th day, even if it falls on the Sabbath in order to keep the

command of circumcision. Jesus says don't give me a hard time if I heal a whole man on the Sabbath!.

- iv. In light of this "everlasting covenant" language, I can appreciate why some of the early Jewish Christians would struggle with the idea that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised!
- d. What were the terms of this 'covenant of circumcision'?
- i. Covenant is typically between two parties, with terms and conditions, benefits and consequences, and duration spelled out. (Covenant examples: marriage, rental agreement, mortgage or purchase of a home.)
 - ii. The parties to the covenant:
 1. First party: God, creator of the universe.
 2. Second party: Abraham and his descendants into the future.
 - iii. Length of the covenant:
 1. "An everlasting covenant" (**Genesis 17:7 & 7:13**)
 - iv. What God will do:
 1. Bless Abraham with many descendants; nations and kings to come from him.
 2. Give his descendants the land of Canaan.
 3. Kings and nations will come from Abraham.
 - v. What Abraham and his descendants will do:
 1. All men in their households to get circumcised. This would be a sign of the covenant. (Abraham might have been wondering if he could have had a different covenant sign, perhaps a nice rainbow like Noah, instead of having to be circumcised at age 99!)
 2. Is God giving the Jews all these promises in exchange for circumcision only? Or are there other requirements stated or implied here? Perhaps; consider:
 - a. God is to be your God and the God of the people after you" (**Genesis 17:7**) They are to have no other gods; He alone is to be their God.

- b. Moses later explains the terms of the Mosaic covenant given at Sinai, in **Leviticus 26**. He says that if the people turn away from God, pursue other gods and do evil, they will be defeated by their enemies and will be cast out of the land promised to them, and scattered among the Gentiles.
 - i. For Abraham, circumcision was the *sign of* the covenant. Like the Mosaic covenant, there are responsibilities on God's people under this covenant, beyond the sign of circumcision.
 - ii. Many Christians today, under the new covenant, incorrectly assume that we get a 'blank check' after we say a prayer or are baptized. No. There are responsibilities on our part – God must be our God.
- c. **Read Leviticus 26:41-42.**
 - i. Moses points back to the covenant given to Abraham. He says that after the people sin, but later repent and turn back to God, "then their uncircumcised hearts will feel ashamed, and they will render satisfaction for their guilt. Then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham I will remember; and I will remember the land."
 - ii. God makes it clear, if it wasn't already, that the Jews needed to do more than just get circumcised to enjoy the blessings that God promised to Abraham.
 - 1. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant.
 - 2. The covenant itself was that they would be God's people and He would be their God.
 - 3. Also points to the idea that God was really looking for 'circumcision of the heart', even at Mount Sinai!
- d. Near the end of his life, Moses repeated this warning to Israel. Read **Deuteronomy 10:12-22**

- i. God is an awesome and mighty God!
 - ii. God had fulfilled his promise to Abraham (nation grew to a great multitude, had become 'like the stars in the sky').
 - iii. People therefore need to be devoted to loving and obeying God with all their hearts and souls.
 - iv. Need to stop being stiff-necked, stubborn and hard-hearted. Must circumcise their hearts!
(Deuteronomy 10:16)
- e. So what happened to circumcision? What became of this "everlasting covenant"? Should God's people still practice circumcision?
 - i. This was a significant issue and question in the New Testament. If we understand this issue, much of the New Testament will make more sense.
 - ii. Did Jesus say anything about circumcision being done away with? (Note that Jesus himself was circumcised on the 8th day; see **Luke 2:21**). No, at least not directly. However, consider:
 - 1. **Read John 14:25-26 and John 16:12-13.**
 - 2. Jesus said that after he departed, the Holy Spirit would come. The Spirit would teach them (the apostles) all things and guide them into all truth. So the apostles would receive "all truth", but some of that deposit of truth would come after Jesus' departure (in this case, as we will see, including further truth about circumcision!)
 - iii. **Read Acts 11:1-18.**
 - 1. Peter recounts the conversion of Cornelius' household (uncircumcised) in which the Holy Spirit showed him that Gentiles could become Christians without circumcision.
 - 2. This is Peter's response to why in the world he would be eating with an uncircumcised Gentile, which was a big deal for an obedient Jew.
 - 3. This is a huge issue for the early church: should we associate with Gentiles, can they become Christians too? If so, do they need to follow the Law of Moses, including circumcision?
 - iv. Council convened in Jerusalem, in **Acts 15**, to resolve this controversy in the early church.

1. Reason for convening the group: Read **Acts 15:1-5**.
 2. Peter references conversion of Cornelius' household.
 3. Barnabas and Paul talk about their ministry among the Gentiles. James speaks last.
 4. Instructions provided in a letter from the apostles to Gentiles in the churches. Read **Acts 15:22-29**.
 - a. Conclusion: Gentiles do not have to follow circumcision nor the Law of Moses (except four specific requirements in the letter).
 - b. This issue and confusion (about whether Christians needed to obey the law, including circumcision) was so deeply rooted in the Jewish Christians that Paul addressed it repeatedly with the early church, including in his letters to the **Romans, Colossians, Galatians, and Ephesians**.
- f. But what about circumcision being an "eternal covenant"? What happened to that?
- i. God did say in **Jeremiah 31:31-33** (numbered **Jeremiah 38:31-34** in the LXX), and as discussed in **Hebrews 8:7-13** (which follows the LXX here), that since the people had broken the old covenant, the time would come when God would establish a new covenant. Then, the Lord said, "I will be their God and they will be my people", and God's laws would be written "into their minds" and "on their hearts".
 - ii. Read **Jeremiah 9:22-25**. In the future, God would address those who were uncircumcised both outwardly (Gentiles) and also inwardly (the Jews, who had uncircumcised hearts). God is looking for the circumcision of the heart.
 - iii. **Read Colossians 2:8-17**, and consider:
 1. Paul says that in baptism we are circumcised by the circumcision made without hands, when we (Christians) are buried with Christ in baptism. (**Colossians 2:11-12**)
 2. Paul also explains that the old Law of Moses was wiped out, taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. (**Colossians 2:14**)
 - a. He also says that the elements of the Law of Moses (including Sabbaths, food restrictions, festivals) were a shadow of the things that were to come, with the substance now realized in Christ. (**Colossians 2:16-17**)

(examples of those shadows that were later fulfilled include the Passover Lamb, the High Priest and the temple services)

- b. Paul says that the circumcision done by Christ (baptism) puts off “the body of sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (**Colossians 2:11**). Based on that, Paul calls all of us now to “put off” all the sins of the flesh.

3. Read Colossians 3:8-11.

- a. Circumcision (physical, outward) was a shadow of the real circumcision that God was looking for, the circumcision of hard-hearted people, who would put away the sins of the flesh. This was fulfilled by the reality of baptism, the inward circumcision done by Jesus, and the Christian life.
 - b. We are to cut off the flesh (like circumcision), cut off our anger, disunity, wrath, filthy language, lies and deceit.
 - c. Paul elsewhere told the Philippian Christians that, “we (Christians) are the circumcision, who worship God in Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh”. (**Philippians 3:3**)
- iv. Is there any foreshadowing in the Old Testament that might have given a clue that circumcision ultimately would be done away with? Consider the following:
1. When the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land under Joshua, the second generation underwent what Justin Martyr referred to as the ‘second circumcision’, as recorded in **Joshua 5:2-9**. Two striking things in this passage:
 - a. The Jews had not circumcised their children during the 40 years of wandering in the desert. Why not? (This was a significant command, completely ignored.)
 - b. In **Joshua 5:2-8**, God commands Joshua to circumcise the men with knives of stone. Why of *stone*? (Certainly they had iron swords and knives, for fighting the Amalekites and building the tabernacle.)
 2. The name ‘Joshua’ (Hebrew) is actually the same as ‘Jesus’ (Greek). You can see from the LXX (Greek language) account of

Joshua, or by comparing 'the OT Joshua/Jesus' with 'Jesus, the Son of God' in a Greek interlinear Bible, in **Hebrews 4:8-14**.

- a. Justin Martyr makes a point in his Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew (c. 160 AD), that the Jews made a big deal about one letter being added to the names of Sarah and Abraham (in **Genesis 17**). However, somehow they ignored the fact that God completely changed the name of 'Hoshea' the son of Nun to 'Jesus' (Joshua), in **Numbers 13:16!** (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap 113; ANF v.1, p.255)
 - b. Note that Jesus (Joshua) would be the one chosen to succeed Moses, to complete the mission of leading God's people into the Promised Land, so that "the congregation of the Lord will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (**Numbers 27:17**).
3. The circumcision brought through Joshua (the first 'Jesus') was with stone knives. Note that stone in many places in the Old Testament represented Christ, such as: **Daniel 2:34-45**; **1 Corinthians 10:4**; and three more examples cited by Peter in **1 Peter 2:4-8** (from **Isaiah 28:16**, **Psalms 118:22** and **Isaiah 8:14**).
 4. In the LXX account, when Joshua (Jesus) is buried at the end of the book of Joshua it says, "In his grave they placed with him the stone knives with which he circumcised the sons of Israel at Gilgal, when he brought them out of Egypt, as the Lord ordered them." (**Joshua 24:31-32**, from the LXX)
 - a. When the apostles quote from the Old Testament, they almost always quote from the Septuagint (LXX). Clearly they were reading the LXX, and assumed that their hearers were doing the same.
 - b. So, the stone knives of the 'second circumcision' were 'buried with Jesus'.
 - c. With this understanding, you may see what Paul said in **Colossians 2:12** in a new light!
 - v. Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160 AD) explains to the Jews why that their circumcision is no longer required. The Christians now have a new and better circumcision which replaces the old one. Ours is a circumcision of the heart that cuts away evil. This was foreshadowed by the 'second circumcision' introduced by 'Jesus' (Joshua) using knives of stone (representing Christ and his words).

1. Justin said to Trypho, "Blessed therefore are we who have been circumcised the second time with knives of stone. For your first circumcision (*that of the Jews*) was and is performed with iron instruments, for you remain hard-hearted; but our circumcision, which is the second, having been instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and from absolutely every kind of wickedness by sharp stones, i.e. the words (preached) by the apostles of the corner-stone cut without hands." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 113, ANF v.1, pp.255-256)
2. Justin gives three reasons why the old circumcision of the flesh given to Abraham was inadequate and had to be replaced by a better circumcision:
 - a. Great men of old were declared righteous without circumcision: Enoch, Noah, Lot, Melchizedek; and even Abraham who was declared righteous before circumcision. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 19, ANF v.1, p.204)
 - b. God was always more interested in circumcision of the heart than the outward circumcision, which was only a sign. As Moses said in **Deuteronomy 10:16**, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 16, ANF v.1. p.202)
 - c. The fact that women cannot be circumcised again shows that this is a sign and not a work of righteousness, since "God has given likewise to women the same ability as men to observe all things which are righteous and virtuous." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 23, ANF v.1. p.206) Men and woman are equal before God.
3. Justin also explained to Trypho the real reason why Abraham was told to circumcise on the 8th day. "The command of circumcision, again, bidding them always to circumcise the children on the eighth day, was a type of the true circumcision, by which we are circumcised from deceit and iniquity through Him who rose from the dead on the first day after the Sabbath (namely through) our Lord Jesus Christ. For the first day after the Sabbath, remaining the first of all the days, is called, however, the eighth, according to the number of days in the cycle, and (yet) remains the first." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 41, ANF v.1, p.215)

- a. The requirement to circumcise on the eighth day was seen by the early Christians as foreshadowing Christ's resurrection on the eighth day (Sunday, the day after the Sabbath, also considered the first day of the week).
4. In the same work, Justin had admonished Trypho and the Jews, to "Wash therefore and now be clean, and put away iniquity from your souls, as God bids you to be washed in this laver, and be circumcised with the true circumcision." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 18, ANF v.1, p.203)
5. Justin challenges one and all: "The blood of that circumcision is obsolete, and we trust in the blood of salvation; there is now another covenant, and another law has gone forth from Zion. Jesus Christ now circumcises all who will – as was declared above – with knives of stone; that they may be a righteous nation, a people keeping faith, holding to the truth, and maintaining peace. Come then with me, all who fear God, who wish to see the good of Jerusalem. Come, let us go to the light of the Lord; for He has liberated His people, the house of Jacob. Come, all nations; let us gather ourselves together at Jerusalem, no longer plagued by war for the sins of her people." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 24, ANF v.1, p.206)

III. God Promises that Sarah Would Have a Son (Genesis 17:15-22)

- a. Read **Genesis 17:15-27**.
- b. Sarai's name changed to Sarah.
- c. Abraham told that Sarah would conceive and give birth to a son (she was 90 and he was 100 at the time).
 - i. Nations and kings to come from Sarah's son (promise of future kingdom through Sarah's offspring).
 - ii. Abraham falls down on his face and laughs! (Of all the outlandish things God had told him, he finds this the most hilarious.)
 - iii. Abraham had believed everything God promised to this point (many descendants, inherit Canaan, etc.) but this promise apparently struck him as outrageous.
 - iv. Abraham says he would be content if the blessing came through Ishmael.
 - v. God says "No; Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him." (**Genesis 17:19**)

1. God makes it absolutely clear that the covenant blessing will be through Sarah's son Isaac, NOT through Hagar's son Ishmael.
2. This point is very significant because Muslims (hundreds of millions in the world) claim that the great covenant blessing came down via *Ishmael* (forefather of the Arabs) rather than Isaac (forefather of the Jews). The Scriptures here clearly state otherwise.
 - a. Either what the Bible says here is correct, or it is not.
 - b. Thomas Jefferson created his own Bible, using a razor and paste to cut out parts of the Scriptures that he did not agree with. As bad as that is, at least he had the intellectual honesty to admit what he was doing! Many today simply skip over reading passages of the Bible that they do not like. Still others, like the Muslims, will boldly assert that certain passages of the Bible that contradict what they teach (like **Genesis 17:19-21**) were somehow 'changed' and can be disregarded!

IV. Abraham's Household Circumcised (**Genesis 17:23-27**)

- a. All the men of Abraham's household (including servants, slaves) undergo the procedure.
- b. This happened when Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13.

V. Recap of This Lesson

- a. God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision when Abraham was 99. It was given to him and his descendants as an "eternal covenant".
- b. Like all covenants (including the new covenant that Christians are under) there are responsibilities upon both parties and consequences for failing to uphold the covenant. Very important to understand our obligations under any covenant with God!
- c. Even in the Old Testament (for example in **Deuteronomy** and **Jeremiah**) God made it clear that he was looking first and foremost at circumcision *of the heart*.
- d. Circumcision was a major controversy in the early church was regarding whether Gentiles Christians also would have to get circumcised. In **Acts 15**, the apostles decided in the Council in Jerusalem that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised.

- e. Circumcision foreshadowed Christian baptism. According to Paul in **Colossians 2**, we undergo the “circumcision of Christ” when we are “buried with Him in baptism”.
- f. When Sarah was 90, God promised that she would have a son to be named Isaac. The promises of the covenant would be through him, not through Ishmael. This contradicts what Muslims are taught (that the blessing would come through Ishmael).