

The Circumcision of Christ

Opening Hymn: #215 — “The Cleansing Stream”

Col. 2:11 (NIV) In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ.

The first time the subject of circumcision appears in the Bible is Genesis 17 where God speaks to Abram and tells him that he is entering into a covenant relationship with him. He changes Abram’s name to Abraham and he promises all the land of Canaan to him and to his seed after him for an “everlasting possession.” As a proof or token of this special covenant relationship between God, Abraham, and Abraham’s seed, God required that 99-year old Abraham be circumcised, and that every male in his house, whether a member of the family or a slave, also be circumcised. From this point forward every one who entered Abraham’s family, or that of his children, or his children’s children, forever were to follow this ceremony showing that they were a part of this covenant arrangement. The procedure was not optional:

Genesis 17:14 The uncircumcised man child ... shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

Ishmael was 13 years old when he and his father were circumcised. Because of this, Arabs who trace their lineage to Abraham through Ishmael still circumcise their males at the age of 13. However, God said that from that point forward, circumcision was to occur when a male baby was eight days old. So a year later when Isaac was born, he was circumcised on the eighth day. The importance of the eighth day was so great that when Israel received the ten commandments which required that no work be performed on the Sabbath, an exception was made for circumcisions. Jesus used this exception in his answer to the Pharisees who accused him of violating the Sabbath by healing a man:

John 7:22,23 (NIV) Because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?

The need for circumcision became an excuse in Genesis 34 when Dinah, a daughter of Jacob by Leah, was “defiled” by Sechem the Hivite. Because Sechem falls in love with Dinah, his father talks with Jacob asking that Dinah be given to his son for his wife. Sechem promises to do anything. Gen. 34:13 says that the sons of Jacob responded deceitfully. They demand that Sechem and all the Hivite males be circumcised. The Hivites suspect nothing. In fact they see great gain in allying themselves with Israel so they readily agree and all the males are circumcised on the same day. We read:

Genesis 34:25 And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brethren, took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males.

In this family there were a lot of half-brothers and half-sisters because Jacob had children by Rachel, Leah, Rachel’s maidservant Bilhah, and Leah’s maidservant Zilpah. But Simeon and Levi were Dinah’s full brothers and for that reason they may have decided it was their job to avenge the outrage

they perceived had been done to their sister. They slaughtered all the males and took everything of value in the city as one takes spoils in war. It all happened because of deceit. They said one thing when they knew they would do quite another. Jacob is outraged:

Genesis 34:30 And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

Jacob never forgot what they did. In Genesis 49 just before he dies, Jacob gives a blessing to each of his sons. He has nothing good to say about Simeon and Levi:

Genesis 49:5-7 Simeon and Levi are brothers; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their selfwill they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

The first-born Reuben had already been passed over in earlier verses, so Jacob's full blessing comes to rest on Leah's fourth-born, Judah, the line that brought forth Jesus the Messiah.

Moses and Zipporah

When Moses was 40 years old, he thought he was ready to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery; instead he was forced to flee for his life. He went into the land of Midian, eventually married Zipporah, and had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer (Exod. 18:3,4). Midian was a son of Keturah and we can be sure Abraham followed the rite of circumcision with the sons he had by Keturah. Yet for reasons that are never explained, in the land of Midian Moses does not circumcise one of his sons. This leads to a quite unexpected event as 80-year-old Moses, Zipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer are on their way to Egypt:

Exodus 4:24-26 And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.

Who is the "LORD" [small caps: Jehovah] trying to kill? Many translators think it was Moses so they substitute his name for the pronoun "him." But since God just told Moses what to say to Pharaoh, it is inconceivable he would now try to kill him. The *Companion Bible* believes it was Moses' son, and this thought appeals to me. The law of circumcision demanded that the uncircumcised person was to be "cut off from his people" (Gen. 17:14), not the father of the son. When Zipporah realizes it is the son who is jeopardy, she knows what must be done and she does it. At whose feet did Zipporah cast the bloody skin? As soon as she does it, we read: "So **he** [the Lord] let **him** [the son] go." Since Zipporah has just saved the life of her son, she is not angry. She casts it at the feet of the angel of the Lord, and she says [according to Rotherham]: "Surely a bridegroom by rites of blood art thou to me." Zipporah does not trace her lineage from Jacob. In Num. 12:1 she is called "an Ethiopian." She is a foreigner in the commonwealth of Israel. But by this act, she claims the right to a covenant relationship with the Lord [through his representative of course].

When this is over, and for reasons that are never explained, Zipporah and her two sons return to her father Jethro's house and they do not go with Moses into Egypt. Later they rejoin him in the wilderness.

The Exodus

Circumcision continued to be practiced when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. We know this because Joshua 5:5 says that all who came out of Egypt were circumcised. But they stopped circumcising anyone in the wilderness. Why? Because their lack of faith made them reject Joshua and Caleb's favorable report of the promised land, Israel became estranged from God. Although the Scriptures do not say why they stopped circumcising their males, it is probable that God himself prohibited them from enacting this sign of the covenant during the 40-year period of their punishment. When this period ended, God told Joshua to circumcise the people:

Joshua 5:8,9 And it came to pass, when they had done circumcising all the people, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole. And the LORD said unto Joshua, This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you.

Israel was now back in a covenant relationship with God. Perhaps the phrase "reproach of Egypt" can be best understood from the words Moses when God threatens to destroy Israel for their wickedness:

Deut. 9:27-28 Look not unto the stubbornness of this people, nor to their wickedness, nor to their sin: lest the land whence thou broughtest us out [*Egypt, of course*] say, Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land which he promised them, and because he hated them, he hath brought them out to slay them in the wilderness.

There is almost nothing more on this subject in the Old Testament except for a quite unexpected use of the word by Jeremiah:

Jer. 4:4 (NIV) Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, **circumcise your hearts**, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done.

Judah and those of Jerusalem were certainly practicing ordinary circumcision, but this outward act had no value unless they "circumcised their hearts"—a phrase that probably meant nothing to them.

Circumcision in the New Testament

The question of whether to circumcise or not was a heated topic in the early church. Those who were deeply committed to Judaism were sure that Gentile converts had to come into the Jewish covenant to be blessed and that meant they had to be circumcised:

Acts 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

Paul and Barnabas debated this question without success so a delegation was sent to Jerusalem asking the apostles to settle this question once and for all. During that discussion Peter speaks:

Acts 15:8 (NIV) God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he

purified their hearts by faith. [vs. 11] We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

That was the compelling argument. God had accepted the “uncircumcised” as they were. Why could not everyone else accept them that way as well? They could. James stands up and proposes a draft of a letter to be sent to the distant congregations and it contains not a word about circumcision.

Paul puts this question into the proper perspective:

Romans 2:28,29 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the **heart**, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Here is that phrase “circumcision of the heart” that Jeremiah spoke about. It is not the cutting off of skin, but the cutting off of the entire “old nature.” Once that “old nature” is gone, we have something new:

Galatians 6:15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

To the Jews circumcision represented the entering into a relationship with God. But the relationship a Christian has with God is different. Our justification comes from faith, not from works. So if circumcision is not appropriate to show our relationship with God, what is?

Col. 2:11-13 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: **buried with him in baptism**, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

Baptism is the symbol for Christians. We are purified, our sins are washed away. We go under the water, are symbolically “buried with him,” and come up alive as a new creature, ready to walk with him in newness of life. Just as circumcision was a kind of initiation into a group possessing certain rights, privileges, and responsibilities, so also is baptism a kind of initiation into a special group with its rights, privileges, and responsibilities. It is a step taken only by those who share the faith demonstrated by father Abraham:

Rom. 4:11,12 (NIV) And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

There was another reason for circumcision practiced by the Jews. It set them apart from their heathen neighbors and they knew it. Samson’s parents, for example, could not understand why he wanted a wife from among the “uncircumcised Philistines” (Judges 14:3). Likewise baptism sets us apart from our heathen neighbors. Only Christians practice it, and only a few of them perform full body immersion in water like Jesus:

John 3:22 After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and **baptized**.

The Greek word translated “baptized” is Strong’s #907, *baptizo*. It means “to make fully wet, to immerse.” Like circumcision, it is only a symbol. That baptism is not required for spirit begetting was demonstrated with the first Gentile convert. In Acts 10 as Peter preaches to Cornelius, the holy spirit falls on these uncircumcised Gentiles. They spoke with tongues and magnified God. The Jews who were with Peter were astonished. Peter speaks:

Acts 10:47 (NIV) Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians equates baptism with “putting on” Christ. He writes:

Galatians 3:26,27,29 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This is similar to Paul’s words in Romans 13:14 where he writes, “Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh.” In other words, cut off the flesh; be baptized into Christ and thus become clothed with him. Put on the robe of Christ’s righteousness so we may enter a covenant relationship with God, might be his special people.

Just because the Jews circumcised themselves did not guarantee that they would attain the blessings God had for them. The unfaithful circumcised ones all died in the wilderness and never entered the promised land as they expected when they left Egypt. So with us: baptism does not guarantee that we will attain the blessings God has for us. If we are unfaithful, we will die in this “wilderness” and will not enter the promised land as we expected when we left our “Egypt” of sin, sickness, and death. Let us look at Israel’s failures and learn lessons we can apply to our daily life.

Heb. 3:12-14 (NIV) See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

The Eighth Day

There is one detail about circumcision we have not considered. Why did God require that it be done on the eighth day? Although some suggest that certain clotting characteristics of the blood are better in an infant on the eighth day than at any earlier time, it is more likely that there is a lesson associated with the number eight. For example, when the first high priest and the underpriests were inaugurated into office, a seven-day period called the “consecration of the priesthood” occurred (described in Lev. chapter 8). On the eighth day that typical priesthood began to function. The antitypical “priesthood,” after its consecration, receives its mark of a “covenant relationship with God,” a circumcision made **without** hands, “in putting off the body of sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). (Anton Frey, *Notes on the Tabernacle*, p. 262.) Then it can begin to function.

There is also a picture at the end of the Millennium age. The close of God's seventh day will be followed by God's great eighth day when the complete cleansing of the flesh will have been accomplished through restitution. Mankind will have attained the perfection that was Adam's when all perfection resided in him. All the obedient of mankind will reach this condition at the close of the Millennium, before they are presented to God by the Christ class whose work will then be finished. They will be purified; the old, sinful, fleshly failings will have been completely cut off and they will have an everlasting covenant relationship with the heavenly father.

Conclusion

God's relationship with his typical people Israel contain lessons which should teach us what we must do to be pleasing to him today. Baptism for the Christian is the equivalent of circumcision for the Jew. Through baptism we enter into a covenant relationship with God. It is not the water that saves us, it is what Peter calls a "good conscience." He saw the water which saved Noah and his family by floating the ark as a symbol of a Christian's baptism:

1 Peter 3:20,21 (NIV) ...in [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Baptism isn't just a one-time ritual which guarantees anything. Jesus asked his disciples:

Mark 10:38 Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

They said they could, and they were right. Jesus asks us that same question. By God's grace and through his strength and power, may we say, "We are able."

Closing Hymn: #95 — "More Christlike"

“Are Ye Able?”

Are ye able to walk in the narrow, strait way,
 With no friend by your side, and no arm for your stay?
 Can ye bravely go on through the darkening night?
 Can ye patiently wait 'till the Lord sends the Light?

Are ye able to crush your soul's longing for Love,
 Will ye seek for no friendship save that from above?
 Can ye pass through this world, lone, unnoticed, unknown,
 While your faith faintly whispers, "He knoweth His own"?

Where the feet of the Blessed One stood, can ye stand?
 Can ye follow His steps to a wilderness land?
 Are ye able to cast aside pleasure and fame?
 Can ye live but to glorify His precious name?

Can ye smile as His dear voice says tenderly "No,"
 When "the field is so white," and your heart yearns to go?
 Can ye rest then in silence, contented and still,
 'Till your Lord, the Chief Reaper, revealeth His will?

Are ye able to lay on the Altar's pure flame
 That most treasured possession, your priceless good name?
 Can ye ask of your Father a blessing for those,
 Who see naught in your life but to scorn and oppose?

When the conflict twixt Error and Truth fiercer grows,
 Can ye wield the strong "Sword" against unnumbered foes?
 Can ye lift up the "Standard" e'en higher and higher,
 While His praises ye sing in the midst of the fire?

When ye see the Lord's cause going down to defeat,
 Will your courage endure in the seven-fold heat?
 Will your faith keep you steadfast, though heart and flesh fail,
 As the New Creature passes beneath the last "Veil"?

Ah, if thus ye can drink of the Cup He shall pour,
 And if never the Banner of Truth ye would lower,
 His Beloved ye are, and His crown ye shall wear,
 In His Throne ye shall sit, and His Glory shall share!

—*Poems of Dawn*

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