

**Genesis 17: 10 - 14; “Circumcision - A Sign”, Sermon # 50 in the series -  
“Beginnings”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on August 19<sup>th</sup>,  
2012, in the Morning Worship Service.**

We are continuing on in our examination of what I am calling the Covenant of Purpose which God made with Abraham. In the midst of making this Covenant with him, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham to show him that He was going to make him not only an exalted father but the Father of a multitude, the Father of many nations. In the salvation of our souls, God does a work of regeneration in our heart so that we are made alive in Jesus Christ, and we have a “new name” in God’s sight and hopefully in man’s sight as well. Christians have a name to live, as it says in Revelation 3: 1.

You remember that Saul, the great persecutor of the church, was converted to Christ, and he was really changed in his heart and in his behavior. The brethren at Jerusalem, when he tried to join with them were afraid of him. They did not know if he had really changed, but Barnabas saw the change and knew that it was real, and he brought him to the Apostles and told them how he now was preaching Christ. He was now preaching the faith which he had once tried to destroy. He needed a new name. His name changed from Saul to Paul because he was a new creature in Christ.

This doesn’t mean that each of us has to have our name literally changed after conversion, but spiritually each of us does have to be changed in our heart from being a rebel sinner to being a humble servant of God. This is the same thing with regard to the issue of circumcision that we are speaking of this morning. When we believe in Jesus Christ we are not required to be physically circumcised, but we are commanded to be baptized. But when we become a Christian, in our hearts we experience a spiritual baptism and a spiritual circumcision, made without hands, made by God Himself, which is God making His covenant with us to change our hearts and to place us into the body of Christ, his Church.

So then, all true believers need to understand what circumcision means to them. In this Covenant of Purpose which God made with Abraham, circumcision was the sign that God intended to have a peculiar people to be His own precious possession, and their fruitfulness would be from Him. Abraham and his male descendants were expected, by God, to be circumcised as a sign of their response of obedience to God’s purpose and His expectation of them to keep covenant with Him. This physical sign of being in covenant with God is a picture of what becomes a spiritual reality in both the Old and New Testaments, not in the baptism of infant children, but in the circumcision of the heart of each believer in Jesus Christ.

This is a work that only God can do in its inception, but which each and every believer willingly participates in. So the question this morning that we are asking is this. How are true believers in both Old Testament and New to understand circumcision? What does it mean for us who are here this morning? Well I believe that it is a sign to Old Testament believers of 3 things. And as we show what it meant to Abram and the Old Testament people of God to receive circumcision, we will also attempt to show what it means to us as New Testament believers in Jesus Christ.

**1<sup>st</sup> – Circumcision is a sign that we are God’s special people.** (verses 10, 12)

In verse 10 it says, “This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised.....” and verse 12, “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.” Now this is the sign of the Covenant of purpose, that God would have a special and distinct people. Abraham was to become the Father of many nations, but the Hebrew people alone would become the people having the promise given to them that Christ would be

descended from them. Others such as Ishmael and other nations which came from Abraham were no doubt circumcised, but the covenant as we will see next week would be narrowed further to the line of persons descending through Isaac.

Circumcision was to be performed by Abraham on himself and all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of his house, it says in verse 23. God would have Abraham to do this as a sign to themselves and their children, to show that they were a peculiar people, a people set apart to God's holy purposes as those who would be His worshippers, and those who would keep His commandments and live by faith in Him. Circumcision is the removal of the foreskin of the male sexual member and this would not be something that would be seen by others who did not know God. It would be known for the most part only by those who practiced this rite, and by God Himself.

Other peoples would hear that this was the practice of the Hebrews, and they would think it peculiar. They would know it as a distinguishing mark of the Hebrew people that they belonged to this God, the God that they claimed was the only true God in heaven or upon the earth. So it is with every true Christian. The Lord has circumcised our hearts and made us to be a people of His own possession. The mark of a true Christian is that His heart is changed, and he or she sees themselves as separated unto the purpose of God. This is what Professor John Murray calls Definitive Sanctification.

Most of the time when we think of the doctrine of Sanctification we think of progressive sanctification. We think of our responsibility to progress in our Christian life from babes in Christ to being mature persons in Christ. Our hearts have been changed by grace and we take steps of obedience praying to be changed to be more like Christ and to become holy in God's sight. But what definitive sanctification is, is "a decisive action that takes place at the beginning of the Christian life, and one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called effectually by God's grace."

It is that God looks at us and sees us as his holy people even though we have much progress yet to be made in living unto Him. We are His saints, we are His special people, we are His saints through faith in Jesus Christ, even though much progress still needs to be made in holiness. If we believe in Christ we are circumcised spiritually and known to God, and known by Him, as His people. He has called us, He has regenerated us, He has given us the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. He has washed us, He has sanctified us, it says in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6: 11. He has made His mark on our hearts just as surely as Abraham circumcised the foreskins of his household, that they would be a people for God's own possession. Circumcision is a sign that we are God's special people.

**2<sup>nd</sup> – Circumcision is a sign that we are God's holy people.** (verse 13)

I am now going to build upon what I just said to you about definitive sanctification. In verse 11 of our text it says, "and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you." In verse 13 it says, "My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant." How can it be that something which is an operation on the flesh can be the sign of an everlasting covenant?

We'll turn with me to Colossians 2: 11-13. We find here the explanation of the difficulty that I related to you, in the wording of our text. It says here, "In Him (that is in Christ) you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all your trespasses..."

Here we have two spiritual pictures given to us, representing 2 great spiritual realities in the New Birth. They are spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism. Both the Old Testament rite

of circumcision and the New Testament ordinance of Baptism are physical rites which represent a spiritual reality in the heart of the believer. And here in these verses that reality is explained. The circumcision of the believer in Jesus Christ is an operation made upon the heart, not by human hands, but by Christ Himself who “puts off the body of the sins of the flesh” from every person who trusts in Him. This is the beginning of holiness. This is definitive sanctification. Sin in our corrupt nature is pictured as having a body. The “body of sin” consists of various parts and members, even as a human body does. There are inward motions of sin in our hearts and there are outward actions performed by the members of our body.

This is a picture of a living sinful corruption in us which is the ruling principle of the way that we think and all that we do. All of us by nature have this body of sin in us. It is called “the Old Man” in many places in Paul’s letters. Christ breaks the ruling and dominating, controlling power of sin in this Old Man so that the believer’s heart feels the guilt and pollution of sin, and realizes the hardness and stubbornness of his heart. All this requires an operation on the heart of every person believing in Jesus Christ.

All of us have inherited these sinful tendencies through Adam, the first man. Spiritual circumcision takes away the strength of our nature to love such sins as anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language, lying. Other more secret sins such as fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness are brought to light by the Holy Spirit’s working to show them to us, convincing us that we then can begin and continue, when we discover them in the thoughts of our hearts, to cut them off; even as in circumcision the foreskin is cut off and cast away. This is the beginning of holiness and it is the basis of all the future earthly progress that we shall make in becoming holy.

Let us ask ourselves this morning, “Has this operation been performed upon my heart so that I do not love my sin any longer? Do I feel the guilt and corruption of sin and bring it to Jesus Christ daily, moment by moment, to be cleansed and forgiven? Do I have the desire to be holy ruling in my heart? Am I willing to co-operate with God in my mortifying of my remaining indwelling sin and corruption of my heart, now that I have believed in Jesus Christ?”

**And then 3<sup>rd</sup> and finally – Circumcision is a sign that we are an obedient people.**  
(verse 14, and verses 22-27)

Verse 14 of our text says this; “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” Circumcision was something that as a physical rite was given to Abraham and his physical descendents, especially those who were descendants of Isaac who would be the people from whom the Savior would come. It was an act of obedience. The person who failed to perform this rite upon his children would be “cut off from his people.” “He has broken My covenant” says God. To be cut off from God’s people meant that all the privileges of being a Jew were lost to him.

His having the oracles of God (Romans 3: 2), being adopted as a covenantal son, having the law, being a part of the service of God and having the promise of other blessings that would spiritually come to him in Christ (Romans 9: 4); all this would all be lost, simply because of a refusal to keep covenant by simple obedience in this ritual. It was the obedience of faith, it was the intention of repentance from every known sin, all rolled up in that one act, for a Hebrew to circumcise his male sons.

An evidence of how serious it was is found in Exodus 4: 20-25 when Moses had failed to circumcise his son. This was probably due to his wife Zipporah wanting to delay it, because that may have been the Midianite custom to wait until the age of 13. God Himself met them on their way back to Egypt, after He called Moses to go to address Pharaoh with the message, “Let my people go and serve Me, and if the Pharaoh did not, that God would kill all their first born sons. God must have then thought of Moses’ disobedience in not circumcising his own son. And so it

says in verse 24, “And it came to pass on the way at the encampment 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 Moses’ feet, and said, ‘Surely you are a husband of blood to me!’” Disobedience in the matter of circumcision could mean death. It is a good picture of what happens if we will not deal with our own hearts and repent of our sins. It will mean our eternal death. Our sins must be cut away from us, our sinful hearts must be changed.

The love of sin and the rationalization of sin must be taken away. God’s law requires that all sin be punished. And the punishment of one who is unrepentant is eternal. Circumcision should be linked more in our minds with repentance rather than baptism. Baptism is the picture of what Christ has done for us in dying for our sins and our being raised to newness of a life of faith, and obedience to his commands. But repentance is turning from sin, the cutting off of sin, the putting of it off and away from us. It requires the grace of God, but it is an act of obedience leading to many other acts of obedience in relation to sin in our hearts. Circumcision pictures this well as a token and a type of the reality in the believer’s life.

You can see this in a number of places in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 4: 4 is a good example of this. “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn so that no one can quench it.” It reminds me of the words of Jesus in Luke 13: 3 – “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Circumcision of the heart is an operation which is performed by God upon the soul, but it is one in which we are willingly involved. Grace at work in us leads to obedience.

Jesus Christ is a bridegroom of blood to us. He went to the cross and suffered, bled, and died so that we can circumcise ourselves to the Lord, spiritually speaking. His bloody sacrifice is applied to our hearts when we by faith trust in him to fulfill the law for us and to bear the punishments due to us for breaking it. This he did at the cross for believers in both Old Testament and New. That is why we can read such words as this in Deuteronomy 10: 15-22: “The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day.

Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality, nor takes a bribe....” “You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name. He is your praise, and He is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude.”

This was part of the fulfillment of God’s covenant of purpose with Abraham. He was circumcised when he was 99 years old, although spiritually he was circumcised much earlier when he left Ur of the Chaldees. Ishmael was circumcised at 13 years of age. And yet I do not believe that we see the evidence of the circumcision of his heart, at least in his younger years we certainly do not. That is what we must have, to truly be in covenant with God. And that can only come by faith in Jesus Christ.

Will you not believe in Him today? He is your praise and He is your God who has done these great and awesome things in His living righteously and dying as a substitute for sinners such as you and I. He died so that you might be able to have the circumcision of your heart and with it a life of holiness leading to eternal life.