

## **Lesson 12 – Circumcision**

It is important that we emphasise those things that are emphasised in God's Word and not make too much of things that are not important matters in God's Word. However, some churches make major issues of things that are spoken of infrequently (or not at all) in the Bible. On the other hand, they may ignore doctrines that are often taught in the Scriptures. It is interesting to note, for example, that the word "baptism" is found 16 times in Paul's epistles. The word "circumcision" is found 41 times in Paul's epistles.

Strangely, while baptism is talked about a great deal, circumcision is hardly ever mentioned in many churches. (If we would extend this beyond Paul's epistles to the entire Bible, there would be an even greater difference between the frequency of these words.) It is very important that we understand what the Bible teaches about circumcision.

### **God's Promise to Abraham**

In Genesis 12:1-3 God made a covenant (or promise) with Abraham. "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing" (verse 2). God promised Abraham a land and a great nation (see also Genesis 13:14-17). After some time passed, Abraham began to wonder how God would fulfil this promise to bring about a great nation through him. You see, Abraham did not yet have any children.

How could Abraham be the father of a great nation when he didn't even have one child? Finally, Abraham thought that maybe God would consider the son of the steward of Abraham's house to be the promised son from which a great nation would arise. However, God rejected this idea and assured Abraham that the son would come through Abraham's "own bowels" (Genesis 15:1-4).

Years passed and still Abraham and Sarah had no son. They then devised their own plan to fulfil God's promise. Hagar was an Egyptian handmaid in Abraham's house. Since Sarah had not been able to bear a child they agreed that Abraham should have a child with Hagar. Hagar did bear Abraham's child, but God did not accept this as a fulfilment of His promise to Abraham (Genesis 16:1-4).

### **A Fulfilled Promise**

Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety "And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him" (Genesis 21:1-2). In Romans 4:19 it says that Abraham's body was "dead" (incapable of reproducing) and so was Sarah's womb. It was impossible at that age for Abraham or Sarah to have a part in bringing a child into this world. However, God does the impossible! He gave Abraham and Sarah a son by miraculously enabling their bodies to reproduce again. God would not accept the efforts of Abraham and Sarah to fulfil His promise (through natural childbirth, the steward, or Hagar).

Instead, He waited until it was humanly impossible and then He fulfilled His promise. God rejected Hagar's son as a fulfilment of His promise because this son was "born after the flesh" (Galatians 4:23). He accepted the son that Sarah bore because this son was "by promise"--- completely a work of God (Galatians 4:23).

### The Sign of God's Covenant

What does all of this have to do with circumcision? In Genesis 17:9-14, God tells Abraham that circumcision will be the sign of the covenant He made with Abraham. (Circumcision is the act of cutting off the foreskin of the male sex organ.) God told Abraham that every male child was to be circumcised. Abraham had learned that God does not accept the works of human flesh, but only that which comes about through His promise. The act of circumcision was to be a reminder to the Jews of this truth. Circumcision means death to the flesh---a piece of flesh is cut off and thrown away as worthless. In the same way, our flesh (human efforts) is worthless (cannot please God). We are to live by faith in God's promise.

### Our Circumcision

In the Old Testament, Israel was required physically to circumcise every male child. We also have a circumcision. "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" (Colossians 2:11). If we compare Ephesians 2:11 with Colossians 2:11 we see that Israel had a circumcision "in the flesh made by hands" while we have a circumcision "made without hands." Our circumcision is spiritual, not physical. Our circumcision is performed by the Holy Spirit, not by human hands (a surgeon). Our circumcision does not cut off a piece of physical flesh, but puts "off the body of the sins of the flesh."

The unsaved person has a dead spirit (Ephesians 2:1 and Ephesians 4:17-18); a darkened soul (Romans 1:21 and Jeremiah 17:9); and a body of sin that is alive and active (Romans 6:6 and Romans 7:18). The unsaved soul is attached or linked to the body of sin so that the person is a slave to sin (Romans 6:20).

When we are saved, our spirit is regenerated or given life (Titus 3:5) and our soul is enlightened (2 Corinthians 4:3-6). Our body of sin is circumcised (cut off from our soul---put to death). This means that we are no longer slaves to sin, but are free to serve God.

### Remember This

There are two things that we ought to remember whenever we see the word "circumcision" in the Bible. The first thing is that our body of sin has been circumcised and put to death so that we are no longer slaves to sin. We will study this further in our next lesson.

The second lesson which circumcision teaches is found in Philippians 3:1-9. "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (verse 3). Paul says that he considers all of his religious efforts and attainments to be worthless. He has no trust or confidence in his own righteousness, but instead "the righteousness which is of God by faith" (verse 9). Just as we are saved by Christ's death and not our good works, in the same way we must now continue to trust in Christ's righteousness rather than in our attempts to be good.

## Review Questions Lesson 12 – Circumcision

### True or False

1. Our doctrinal statement and church traditions should determine what we emphasise in our teaching.
2. Very quickly after God's promise was given, Abraham had a son.
3. Water baptism was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham.
4. The spirit of an unsaved person is dead.

### Multiple Choice

5. The word "circumcision" in the Bible:
  - a) is of very little importance
  - b) is found only in the Old Testament
  - c) is a bad translation
  - d) should remind us of two important truths about our spiritual lives
6. In Genesis 12:1-3, God made a covenant with Abraham and:
  - a) promised that Christ would die for his sins
  - b) promised a land and a great nation
  - c) warned Abraham that he would curse him if he disobeyed
  - d) then failed to fulfil His promise
7. When Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety:
  - a) Abraham left his country
  - b) Sarah gave birth to a baby boy
  - c) Abraham separated from Lot
  - d) Abraham fought against several kings

### Fill in the Blanks

8. In the Old Testament, Israel was required to \_\_\_\_\_ every male child.
9. When we are justified by faith our spirit is \_\_\_\_\_ .
10. Circumcision should teach us to have no confidence in the \_\_\_\_\_ .

#### Further Study

Colossians 1:13  
Ephesians 2:19  
Titus 2:14, Ephesians 2:4,  
Ephesians 5:8  
Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 3:10  
Philippians 2:13,  
Ephesians 1:3