

EXPOSITION OF GENESIS

Message #40

Genesis 17:9-14

Abraham was called a “friend of God” three times in the Bible: 1) by Jehoshaphat-king of Judah (II Chronicles 20:6-7); 2) by James, the brother of our Lord (James 2:21-23); 3) By Jehovah, Himself (Isaiah 41:4, 8). God imputed righteousness to Abraham because of his faith (Genesis 15:6), but He imparted friendship to Abraham because of Abraham’s faithfulness (James 2:21-23).

GOD WILL FULFILL HIS PROMISES TO HIS PEOPLE EVEN WHEN THEY HAVE FAILED BUT AS GOD’S PEOPLE WAIT FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF THOSE PROMISES, THEY NEED TO FAITHFULLY OBEY GOD’S WORD.

HISTORICAL REALITY #1 - The demand of circumcision. 17:9-10

In these verses, God gives Abraham a demand which he is to “keep.” This word “keep” which shows up in verses 9 and 10, is one that means God expected Abraham to keep, preserve, observe and honor this demand of circumcision. We learn from verse 11 that this was a sign of the legal, covenantal pact that God had made with Abraham.

The word “circumcision,” which is obviously a key word of the text showing up six times in six verses, is one that literally means to cut off the front part (Gesenius, p. 456). Although circumcision was practiced in other places at the time of Abraham, the specific Abrahamic and theological connection originated from God.

Obviously because of Abraham’s age, there was nothing he could humanly do to fulfill verse 6, the lineage promise, or verse 8, the land promise, but there was something God expected him to do as he waited for God to fulfill verses 6 and 8 and that was circumcision. **God demanded that he actively obey His word on this matter of circumcision as he waited for God’s plan to unfold.**

HISTORICAL REALITY #2 — The description of circumcision. 17:11-14

Fact #1 - The place of circumcision. 17:11a

The place where the circumcision was to take place is called “the flesh of your foreskin.” The noun “flesh” refers to flesh of skin on the human body and the noun “foreskin” refers to the male sexual organ. Dr. S.L. Johnson says, “Technically speaking, to circumcise is to cut off the . . . foreskin of the male sexual organ” (Study #32, p. 2). Obviously, this is the organ that produces a seed and this organ was to bear a sign until the seed - Jesus Christ - would come to this earth (Galatians 3:16; 5:6; 6:15).

Fact #2 - The purpose of circumcision. 17:11b

The stated purpose here is that it was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. Just as the rainbow was a sign that God had entered into a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:13), so circumcision was a sign that God had entered into a covenant with Abraham.

A Divine sign is a symbol of something God has promised in the past which brings to memory something God will or will not do in the future. For example, the rainbow causes God's people to remember that God has promised He will never again destroy the whole world by flood.

Now contextually, circumcision symbolizes that God has promised to give Abraham a great lineage blessing. This lineage blessing will include a special line of people, and special King and a specific land (Genesis 17:6-8).

Circumcision literally was a sign on the male organ which symbolized that God would keep His Word to Abraham and through him would come a King who could lead Abraham's people their promised land. **Once Jesus Christ was born, circumcision was no longer necessary (I Corinthians 7:19), as Paul said "circumcision is nothing."**

In the Bible, circumcision also has a variety spiritual meanings and applications:

- 1) It pictures ridding oneself of sin in view of our Christological position - Colossian 2:11.
- 2) It pictures a faith that saves without any human works - Romans 4:9-12.
- 3) It pictures a whole-hearted commitment to God - Deuteronomy 10: 16; Jeremiah 4:4.
- 4) It pictures the fact that only God sees who are His true people - Genesis 17: 14.
- 5) It pictures those who are clean and ready for use by God - Joshua 5:9.

One very serious error of theology is the misguided and misinformed perspective that says water baptism has replaced circumcision as a new sign of the new covenant and therefore infants need to be baptized. **No such derivative is possible if one properly understands this covenantal sign between God and Abraham.**

(Mistake #1) - The major mistake that supporters of infant baptism make is to spiritualize this covenant with Abraham rather than take it literally. As we just demonstrated, there are many Biblical spiritual applications which may be made, however, we must always remember that the covenant God made with Abraham is primarily a physical covenant - physical land (Genesis 17:8; 15:18-21); physical lineage (Genesis 17:4); physical king (Genesis 17:6). **Circumcision is a physical act. To claim that this covenant is primarily a spiritual covenant is to totally misinterpret the promises.**

(Mistake #2) - The second major mistake is to claim water baptism has replaced circumcision. The main problem is that **nowhere in the Bible does it say this.** We may be certain that covenantal replacements would be explicitly stated by God in His Word.

There is only one reference in which baptism and circumcision may be found in the same context, and in that context Paul is making a point which is, Spirit baptism, a work performed by God "without hands," is far greater than physical circumcision (Colossians 2:10-13). This passage is discussing how complete one is in Jesus Christ, not infant baptism replacing circumcision. **Furthermore, when Jesus Christ spoke of a new covenantal sign, the one He specifically mentioned was not water baptism, but the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; I Corinthians 11:23-26).**

Dr. Louis Berkhof, a fine Reformed theologian, admits, "... there is no explicit command in the Bible to baptize children and there is not a single instance in which we are plainly told that children were to be baptized." "... the New Testament contains no direct evidence for the

practice of infant baptism in the days of the apostles” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 632-634).

Fact #3 - The people of circumcision. 17:12-13

Every male of Abraham’s household was to be circumcised and this was to start when the male was eight days old. This eighth day would become part of the O.T. law - Leviticus 12:3 and was practiced until the days of Jesus Christ - Luke 2:21.

There is a remarkable event that occurred in November of 1946. An article was published in the Journal of American Medical Association, listing many of the reasons why circumcision was advisable for newborn males. But the article failed to mention, what doctors believed to be, the safest time to perform the surgery. Dr. S. I. McMillen Writes: “. . . a newborn infant has peculiar susceptibility to bleeding between the second and fifth days of life. Hemorrhages at this time, though often inconsequential, are sometimes extensive; they may produce serious damage to internal organs, especially to the brain. It is felt that the tendency to hemorrhage is due to the fact that the important blood clotting element, vitamin K, is not formed in the normal amount until the fifth to the seventh day, it is clear that the first safe day to perform circumcision would be the eighth day . . . A second element which is also necessary for the normal clotting of blood is prothrombin. It appears that an eight day old baby has more available prothrombin than on any other day in its entire life. Thus one observes that from a consideration of vitamin K and prothrombin determines the perfect day to perform a circumcision in the eighth day” (S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, pp. 21-23).

Fact #4 - The punishment of uncircumcision. 17:14

God viewed circumcision as a very serious matter and one who did not become circumcised was cut off from Abraham’s family. This would include a separation from a relationship with God and His lineage of people.

Today if you want a relationship with God, you don’t need a physical circumcision; you must have a spiritual circumcision of heart made without hands. This comes by faith in Jesus Christ. Once you have had this circumcision, one needs to circumcise one’s life by obeying God’s Word as one waits for God to fulfill His plan and purpose for your life.