

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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THE SIGN OF CIRCUMCISION (*GENESIS 17*)

Not a few students treat this “covenant of circumcision” as a new covenant, an additional agreement to the Covenant made in Genesis 15. Actually the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant are spelled out all across chapters 12 to 24. If you collect everything that God promised to do for Abraham and collate them, they number four items: a *son*, the *land*, a *nation*, and the *blessing*. The concept of circumcision isn’t an additional item to the Covenant Promises but rather Abraham’s signature, if you will, to the agreement. God signed it by passing down through the dead animals (chapter 15); here Abraham signs it by circumcising himself and all the males in his camp.

Circumcision isn’t a mark of being Jewish or a genetic descendant of Abraham. It is a sign that a person is under the umbrella of the Covenant. Whoever was not circumcised was thrown out of the camp. But whoever was circumcised, be he slave or free, Jewish or foreigner, would enjoy the benefits of living in Abraham’s camp. And of course the women would also benefit from the same blessings by their association with the circumcised men. So this ceremony would prove to be a *sine qua non* of Abraham’s descendants: it simply had to be done, generation after generation. You can see the non-negotiable aspect of the need for circumcision in the story of Zipporah and Moses’ son. (Exodus 4:24-26)

El Shaddai – This Hebrew phrase אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי can be translated in several ways: either *God Almighty*, or *God who is sufficient*. The latter meaning is based on the root *shad*, which means “female breast,” which is all-sufficient for a woman’s infant.

Notice that God doesn’t come to Abram in a vision this time; he comes personally, in a way that Abram can see the form of God in his glory. Abram as a result falls on his face. Abram is seeing God in his power (Almighty), and as the God who is the source of all goodness (sufficient). God opens both of these assets to Abram in the Covenant. That’s why God reveals his names to his people – to tell them what he has for them, to put these things within their reach, to give them the hope and confidence that what they are seeing, up close and personal, is for them.

Walk before me and be blameless – Now it becomes clear what it is that God is after with Abram and his descendants: he wants to reverse this curse of sin on the human race.

He wants a holy people who understand the importance of righteousness.

To “walk before God” means that a person is aware of God, he senses the reality of God – and the glory and majesty and wisdom and power that is so self-evident when one sees God. It’s the ability to walk in two worlds: Adam and Eve had it for a short time, but then lost that connection to the spiritual world, which is what plunged them and all their descendants into moral darkness. Now God wants to bring man back into the light so that he will have an unerring source of truth, and tap into the resources of Heaven that alone can address the needs of man in the physical Creation. So Abram’s religion is different from all others in this one point: he *knows* God is real by his personal contact with him.

We’ve already seen (in Noah’s case) what “blameless” means: The Hebrew word תמים means “whole, sound”. That means he had all the necessary aspects of what God is looking for in his people. There may still be sin in the

heart, but his special character and divine relationship as God's son will take care of any problems that arise from sin.

But if man really does "walk in God's presence" and is "blameless" as God expects, that can only mean that God wants us to return to that "image" concept of Creation, that we are to be his *sons* – as the Son of God in Heaven relates to his Father in the Trinity. The Creation account describes the kind of son that God wanted to see in man, the seven character traits of the perfect son. So Abram was "a man of God ... complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:17)

The LORD told Abram that he wanted to "greatly increase your numbers." We can assume that this didn't simply mean to multiply Abram's physical descendants regardless of their character. God wanted more children like their father Abram – men and women of his faith, who shared a hope in the Promises that Abram wanted. Like father, like children; that's the goal here.

They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did." (John 8:39)

In other words, the Covenant heirs are going to find out that "walking before God" and being "blameless" is the key to God's good will toward them. This sign of circumcision is a badge of our cause: we Christians take God and his holiness very seriously in our lives.

Your name will be Abraham – Now God changed Abram's name to **Abraham** – *father of many nations*. The significance lies in the fact that what God is doing for Abraham will be extended to multitudes of people around the world. It's not just that he will have millions of children, but that they will also inherit the Covenant that God gave Abraham because of their relationship to him: he is their Father (Romans 4:12), and through him they inherit Heaven's Treasures.

There will be children of Abraham in all nations, in all cultures, all through the rest of history. Imagine being able to see live births in Abraham's line, showing up like dots of light all around the globe – and each dot represents another sinner brought into the light of the eternal Covenant. Each spiritual baby is an heir of Abraham and can claim his inheritance. Each child will grow up "in the fear and admonition of the LORD," with full rights as the children of God, made into the image of the Eternal Son who gives them his life from Heaven.

Everywhere in the world as "two or three" gather together in Christ's name, they will talk of the Covenant promises and encourage each other about when they will finally see the fulfillment of that Covenant in their own lives. Abraham's inheritance will become the foundation of untold numbers of churches in all cultures, speaking thousands of languages, united by their common ancestry and birthright. As God did for their forefather Abraham, so he will do for all his children – none of them would have it any other way. They all understand the precious Treasure that God has given to Abraham and his children.

This is, in fact, Abraham's Family – spiritual, destined for glory, mirroring the Family of the Trinity on earth.

The land, of course, would be Canaan for 2000 years as the Israelites enjoyed their physical inheritance. But in the longer view, the "land" is really God's world, full of riches and "flowing with [*spiritual*] milk and honey" (see 1 Peter 2:2; Psalm 19:10), nourishing and blessing Abraham's Family. The basic institutions that would have their physical locale in Canaan also have their eternal counterparts – the Temple is in Heaven, the Throne of the King is in the Eternal City, the eternal Sacrifice is on the altar of the Temple in Heaven (Hebrews 12). Locale will be just as important for the spiritual children as it ever was for the Israelites in the Old Testament; we are looking forward to a "City, whose builder and maker is God" – a Kingdom that "cannot be shaken."

So Abraham's name change represented the far-reaching consequences of what God really has in mind with his Covenant.

Keep my covenant – The Hebrew word means “to keep, watch over, guard.” In other words, this Covenant is a precious treasure; it is of the utmost importance. It involves the eternal state of one's soul. There are so many people who despise and belittle the things of God, but on Judgment Day they will finally realize that they foolishly turned their backs on the “one thing needful.” Those who know the precious nature of this Covenant, however, will do whatever they can to make sure it's theirs. They will keep the Covenant as an unchanging inheritance;¹ they will preserve and teach the points of the Covenant to the next generation – like preserving the Declaration of Independence.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 13:44)

But now we learn that God adds an important stipulation to this Covenant:

THERE ... MUST ... BE ...

NO ... MORE ... SIN

To God, this is a non-negotiable item. Sin has no place in God's world. It's filth, it's stench, it's rebellion, it's the character of a traitor, it dishonors God who created us in holiness, it ruins God's perfect world, it deserves God's wrath. And for most of humanity, wrath is what's going to happen to them. So, when God is preparing special children to live with him forever, the first item on the agenda is this matter of their sin.

The idea of circumcision is that Abraham and his children must get rid of every sin, every trace of sin, doing whatever it takes. No lukewarm attitudes allowed! Cutting one's flesh is a desperate measure. It proves that we

are willing to die, if necessary, in order to inherit eternal life. Christians are supposed to walk by the Spirit, and you will not “gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16) Jesus talked about this same passion for God's holiness.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matthew 5:29-30)

Circumcision, then, is a sign that we are God's children, heirs of the Covenant promises – it shows that we have cut off the sinful flesh and no longer live by that principle anymore. We now turn our backs to the world so that we don't fall prey to satisfying our flesh. We have put behind us the things that so offend our God.

For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life — is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:16)

In doing that, we will be fit to inherit the Covenant. After all, God requires us to “walk before him” – how can we live in sin and walk before this holy God? How can we think we will get away with the least sin, since this God watches us continuously, knows our every thought and feeling, and will know immediately if we don't deserve his inheritance? And we are called to be “blameless” – again, this also would be impossible if we live in sin, in any form, since sin rebels against God's Law and brings ruin to the world he put in our care. So the requirement that we put aside sin completely is entirely appropriate for Abraham's Family.

Circumcision – A circumcision is done to the males, but though that might seem obvious at first it aims at a more profound concept than simply targeting gender. *First*, if God were

¹ And if God said to “keep” it, that means (contrary to modern opinions) that God first gave the entire thing to Abraham, and it hasn't changed since that time.

simply demanding that cutting flesh in and of itself were sufficient, then he could have required cutting off a finger, for example – something that the women could do as well.

Second, cutting off the foreskin targets the area where we sinners are the most reprobate and rebellious: sexual sins. Paul always puts this topic at the head of the list for things to cut away from one's life.

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality ... (Galatians 5:19)

Third, circumcising the males reflects the fact that the Father wants his *Son* to be free of sin, pure and holy, ready to receive his inheritance. Remember that this whole thing reflects the Trinity relationship: the Eternal Son experiences the fullness of the Father, and the Father is pleased with his Son and gives him all of himself. And since it's *that* inheritance that is promised to Abraham and his descendants, then we have to think in terms of the Son being made pure and ready to receive it. Gender is not the issue; it's a matter of dealing with the "sinful flesh" if you want the inheritance of the Son.

Circumcising the foreskin is not emasculation.² It's putting off the "works of the flesh," the part of our nature that responds so positively to "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life." (1 John 2:16) The goal is not to "go the whole way" and kill ourselves, but to be made new: "You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator." (Colossians 3:9-10)

What is critical about this whole topic of circumcision is that this is thoroughly an Abrahamic doctrine, not a Mosaic one. For the way the Apostle Paul warns us about

² Which Paul wishes his enemies would do to themselves, if they really think that sin is so superficial (i.e., physical only) that outward acts of denying oneself physical pleasures would remedy the problem! (Galatians 5:12)

circumcision, and the way he identifies it solidly with the Law of Moses, one would think that we Christians should have nothing to do with circumcision any more. Actually that's far from the truth.

It's mentioned three times in the Mosaic Law. The first instance is only in passing, when the Law discusses the purity requirements for women – after eight days they are told to circumcise their male infants. The other two instances are in Deuteronomy and they both focus on the spiritual aspect of circumcision, the circumcision of the heart.³

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. (Deuteronomy 10:16)

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

So the real doctrinal center of the topic is not in the Law but rather here in Genesis 17 – with the *man of faith*.

Now why then does Paul warn us so clearly and urgently against circumcision?

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:1-2)

It's because *Jesus has already put the flesh to death in his own death!* It's not circumcision that is Paul's problem, it's *who is doing it*. Christians accept the finished work of Christ; thus they don't need to turn back to the Law – or even this Abrahamic sign – to be counted part of Abraham's children. It's already done for them. We are born

³ See also Jeremiah 4:3-4 for another example of bringing out the spiritual meaning of the physical act.

circumcised by the hand of the Father, not by man.

Jesus put the flesh to death in himself; the transaction is then carried out in Christians by the Spirit of Christ.

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. (Romans 2:28-29)

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)

The flesh is exactly what pulls us away from God. The works of the flesh *must* be cut away if we want to inherit the Covenant Promises; and what the Eternal Son does to us in crucifying the “old man” is perfect, eternal, spiritual – a circumcision that we could not have achieved on our own. In this way, the purpose of circumcision is achieved: we now “walk before God” and are “blameless” in his sight. That’s why Paul is so fervently adamant against going back to the physical circumcision. *That* won’t save us; only Christ’s crucifixion will.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:12-13)

So we are all circumcised in *his* death.

Sarah will give you a son – It is now that Abraham is told specifically that Sarah will be the mother of the promised son. But he still doesn’t believe it.

What Abraham must do is face the *impossibility* of the thing. This step is key to true faith. There are certain things that God must do, not us. There *must* be a son (Abraham understands that) and the son *must* be born by the power of the Spirit, not by natural means.

There’s a good reason for this, which we now know in the Christian era: it was a type of the birth of God’s own Son as a man, to the virgin Mary. The miracle brought the presence, wisdom, power and glory of God within man’s context so that the problems of mankind could be solved once and for all. The Son of God must become a man and apply the power and wisdom of God to man’s problems, and distribute the Covenant Promises – Heaven’s Treasures – to the rest of Abraham’s Family.

But there’s another crucial reason for the Spirit giving Sarah a son: it’s also a type of the birth of a Christian. Becoming a Christian – getting converted – is not a natural act of the will. Christians are “children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13) We are born of the Spirit, precisely because our inner man must be changed to conform to the image of the Eternal Son. This can’t be done in any other way but by the hand of God, doing a miracle, creating a new man out of the old.

Unless we get hold of the concept of the impossibility of what is needed for our spiritual life with God, we will never turn to God to provide it for us. If we do turn to him, however, and are convinced that it can’t be done except by him, *then* we are willing to *wait* on him however long it takes. “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD.” (Psalm 27:14)

You will call him Isaac – The Hebrew name *Isaac* actually means “he laughs.” It reflects, no doubt, the fact that Abraham laughed at the idea that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age. This shows just how deep-seated his skepticism was, and how much he had to learn about God. Evidently he just wasn’t thinking in terms of a miracle to solve the problem of his getting an heir.

So the LORD would leave a perpetual reminder in Abraham’s life of what he is capable of doing. “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26) “God is able from

these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” (Matthew 3:9) Abraham, every time he calls his son’s name, would remember his skepticism that God could do the impossible for him when the situation demanded it. God likes to leave memorials behind to keep us mindful of his presence and power.

Everyone circumcised – The LORD told Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household – including the servants, any foreigners who were living with him, *and his son Ishmael*. That’s an unexpected twist to the Covenant. Slaves, of course, would never stand any chance of inheriting the Promises. But Ishmael was specifically cut out of the Covenant, being the son of the slave woman. God promised to make him into a great nation as well, but the Covenant exclusively went to Isaac: “But I will establish my covenant with Isaac” – not Ishmael.

This points to an aspect of Abraham that we’ve seen before, and that we will again see numerous times in the future. Anybody who is related to Abraham in any way experiences blessings, whether they stand to inherit the Covenant Promises or not.⁴ He rescued Lot from his enemies; he treated Hagar kindly; because of Abraham the angels rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom. And now, it seems, even the slaves in Abraham’s camp would experience “the good life” because they are part of Abraham’s entourage. This will hold for the future as well: when the Israelites later take over the land of Canaan, even their slaves got to live in “the land flowing with milk and honey.”

Ishmael, too, though he wouldn’t inherit the Family inheritance, would live under the umbrella of his father Abraham and multiply into nations and multitudes. Life would be hard at first, when he and his mother were thrown out of the camp; but God’s blessing

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 7:14 for an example of those who benefit from being related to Covenant heirs. As God blesses the heir, those in the immediate vicinity (though not necessarily an heir themselves, like Ishmael or Lot) nevertheless enjoy an atmosphere protected and blessed by the presence of God.

started working in their favor in the desert, even when they were separated from Abraham. No son of Abraham will go hungry.

The Point – The issue of circumcision is difficult to come to terms with because of what Paul later does with the subject. He identifies the act with the Law, and therefore reasons that circumcision should be avoided by Christians who live by faith. And yet it’s only referenced a few times in the Law of Moses, and then mainly in its spiritual (New Testament) sense. The doctrine of circumcision is laid out for us only here in Genesis, with Abraham the man of faith.

Therefore we have to understand circumcision as a matter of the Covenant primarily, not of the Law; it’s a mark of an heir of Abraham. And the Son (as we know from the Trinity) is to be holy, to be righteous, to be free of the “sin which clings so closely.” (Hebrews 12:1) A Son of God lives in the presence of God, and has turned his back on the fallen world. The flesh has been “cut away”, put to death.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)

So circumcision is absolutely necessary for the Christian, in order to claim inheritance rights from Abraham.

Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. (Romans 2:29)

But how does circumcision relate to the Law? We will see in the rest of the Pentateuch that the Law describes a perfect person, someone who “loves God and loves his neighbor” – if they would keep this Law perfectly. And the Israelites were told that they must keep this Law perfectly if they wanted to be considered “righteous.” (Deuteronomy 6:25) Paul’s warning about

circumcision doesn't contradict any of that. What he's warning us about is even trying to keep the Law on our own, particularly since Christ has already done it all for us. There must now be a dynamic shift in the life of the Christian from our works to Christ's works – with the result that, in all ways (circumcision included), “the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh [*i.e., our deeds*] but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:4) Then we will be in Christ's image. So for us, circumcision doesn't represent the fact that we now keep the Law; it represents the fact that the Law is being kept for us *by someone else*. The end result is the same: righteousness; but Christ does it for us now, we don't.

On a side note, there are unfortunately many who think that Christian baptism corresponds to circumcision. It doesn't. Not only does baptism represent a different spiritual concept, Paul makes it plain to us in Galatians that Christians *must not* submit

themselves to circumcision (as a religious rite) in particular; that physical act is no longer necessary, and it even interferes with the spiritual point of Christ's sacrifice. Baptism, on the other hand, is absolutely necessary.

He was writing to legalizers who were determined to do something physical in their religion to keep the Law. But the same problem has now come into the Church when people turn to baptism as a “modern” replacement for circumcision so that they can justify baptizing their infants. According to Paul, physical circumcision as a sign of the Covenant must *stop* – it must not be replaced by another physical act; we Christians don't even want to go there now. Baptism is a physical act as well, but to correlate it with circumcision in light of Paul's argument is bringing one in danger of the “false Gospel” that he condemns so forcefully in the first chapter of Galatians. Our spiritual circumcision has already been done.

The important thing to see is that the flesh just won't coexist with the Promises of the Covenant; the two are incompatible. If you study the passages given (there are many more!) you can see that God is calling his children to a spiritual world, to enjoy spiritual treasures. What the sinful flesh wants is the direct opposite of this calling. In each case the Promise would be negated by the desires of the flesh.

Promise	Spiritual fulfillment	Denied to Flesh
<i>Son</i>	Christ – Heir of fullness of God	Ephesians 3:14-19 1 Peter 1:4
<i>Land</i>	Heaven – Spiritual Home	Colossians 3:1-4 John 3:3-8
<i>Nation</i>	Church – body of Christ	Romans 9:8 John 1:10-13
<i>Blessing</i>	Resurrection to new life	Romans 6:10-13 1 Corinthians 15:42-49

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the

grace of God, for if righteousness were through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:20-21)

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