

20240203 Genesis 17 – Circumcision of the Heart

Two weeks ago, we saw God make an everlasting covenant with Abram. He was promised descendants, and he was promised heirs from his own body who would be more numerous than the stars in the sky, and they would be the inheritors of that specific piece of land called Israel.

Last week, we looked on as Abram and Sarai grew restless, waiting for God to fulfill His promises. You might remember that Sarai blamed God for making her barren, and she gave her hand maid Hagar to Abram to “help God out” in providing an heir for Abram. Sarai became odious in the sight of Hagar who began to gloat over her ability to have a child. Abram threw up his hands in frustration. The Apostle Paul cites this narrative to explain the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of the Law. Abram and Sarai attempted to bring about the will of God by their works. Paul says the offspring of Hagar were “children of the Law”, and the offspring of Sarai would be “children of grace” as the promise was through God’s work.

Today, we will study about circumcision. We will learn that the Old Covenant dealt with the circumcision of the body, whereas the New Covenant deals with circumcision of the heart. Before we begin, let’s review the basic idea of circumcision. The word in English comes from two Latin words meaning “cut around”. It was a procedure of cutting away the excess skin (flesh) from around the foreskin of the penis. This was no doubt chosen in part because several times a day, a man would be reminded of his identity as a beneficiary of the covenant of God. This is a foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit’s work in the life of every believer to “cut away” the “excess flesh” that resides in our soul even after salvation. Let’s read.

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. [doesn’t mean “sinless” Heb word “innocent of blame”] ² And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. [this extends way beyond the Jews] ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram [exalted father], but your name shall be Abraham [father of nations]; for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. ⁸ Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession [everlasting means everlasting]; and I will be their

God.” [this promise will be only to those descended from Sarai. It will only apply to the descendants of Isaac.]

⁹ And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. [this cutting will be the sign] ¹² He who is eight days old [when clotting agents are at their highest levels]¹ 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. ¹³ He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ 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.” [the covenant sign given to Abraham – how odd... the cutting away of the flesh which was a symbol of “putting off the sinful nature”] Even in the Torah the meaning behind physical circumcision is pronounced by Moses.

Deut 10:16 ¹⁶ Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. [get rid of this will that is contrary to the things of God]

¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, [mere princess] but Sarah [princess-lady of royalty] shall be her name. ¹⁶ And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.”

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” [questions of wonder, not of doubt] ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”

¹⁹ Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac [means laughter] ; ***I will establish My covenant with him*** for an everlasting covenant, and ***with his descendants*** after him. [this absolutely affects our political viewpoints] ²⁰ And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ ***But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom***

¹ Vitamin K is highest on this day and vitamin K plays a pivotal role in regulation and control of the important clotting factors in the coagulation pathway that helps in stopping bleeding.

Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.”²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

²³ So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.



I want to speak for a moment about circumcision of the heart. God’s Word has much to say about the flesh. How and why do we experience “circumcision of the heart?” Let me start by saying that I have come to believe that each of us is a three-part (some would say “tripartite”) being. I came to this understanding by reading such scriptures as Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, which mention the division between the soul and the spirit.

*¹² For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of **soul** and **spirit**, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12 NKJV)*

*²³ Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole **spirit**, **soul**, and **body** be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 NKJV)*

Let’s look at these three parts and analyze their function.

The Body – This is the part of you that is physical. You are born in this body, and from the moment you were born, you were on a trajectory for this body to fail, die, and decay. This body is the part of you through which you experience the world around you. You sit on a chair. You see an event with your eyes. Genesis 3:19 tells us that from dust we came, and to dust we shall return. Our bodies were “broken” when Adam sinned. Each of us has an ultimate appointment with death. *²⁷ And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, (Hebrews 9:27)* It is important not to get this body confused with what the bible talks about when it mentions the “flesh”. There is nothing inherently evil about your body. It is referred to as *basar* in Hebrew. It is the material physical aspect of man.

The Soul – is referred to as the *nephesh* in Hebrew. This term is found over 700 times in the Old Testament. We not only HAVE a living soul, we ARE a living soul. It is something between the body and the spirit, but it is not a mix of the two. The Apostle Paul uses the term *psyche* in Greek. The soul is self-consciousness; it stands for the individual you and me, and all that makes us who we are. The ingredients that make us human beings are in the soul. The soul comprises our thoughts, ideas, love, emotions, decisions, rationalizations, and ultimately our choices. All of our choosing takes place in the soul. The soul is the seat of all of our affections. It is in the realm of our emotions, and that is



where we experience the Satanic attacks and inward attacks that Paul refers to as the war/tension being waged within him. (Romans 6) It is our affections and emotions that often are at war with our spirit. The soul is the part of you that relates to all other human beings and animals around you.

Jesus died on the cross to redeem our souls. ³⁹ *But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:39 KJV)* Before salvation our souls were at war with God and the things of God until our spirits came alive through faith in Christ. When we came under conviction through the power of the Holy Spirit, we were able to love God back. It is here in the soul where transformation is going on. This is where the renewal of the mind takes place. This is where the circumcision of the heart occurs. It is ongoing. It is what is often called the "sanctification process". Another way to call it would be the "renewal process". Don't get hung up on what you're going to call it, just know that your soul is not where it's supposed to be until you wake up in heaven. In the meantime, it is transformed one stronghold at a time through the washing of the word (Ephesians 5:26). And, unlike the body, the soul will live eternally. As CS Lewis says, it will be an everlasting horror or an everlasting splendor.

The spirit – You also have a spirit. It is the *ruach* in Hebrew and referred to as the *pneuma* in Greek. When you were born as a human, you had within you a spirit that was dead or perhaps dormant. When you came to the Lord by faith, you were instantaneously made a new creation. When we come to Christ we are a new creation. Paul says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV)*. So, what does that mean exactly? It means that your spirit was once dead or dormant, but now it is alive. It means your spirit within you has the capability to communicate with the God of the Universe directly. Pastor Larry teaches that this is the area where the Holy Spirit resides. This spirit is what is now sanctified and made holy before the Lord. This is the part of you that communicates with God.

16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.

You're now wondering, "Pastor, how is this all related to the business of circumcision?"

Although there is teaching to the contrary, the "flesh" (the unrenewed soul) stays with you even after you become a believer. Unfortunately, we continue sinning after we become believers. When I talk about your flesh, please don't think I'm talking about the body that you are in. That is not where the problem lies. It merely houses the you where the thinking goes on. I am talking about your soul that is within you. I am talking about your mind, will, and emotions that still, at times, due to flesh patterns, are contrary to the things of the Holy Spirit.

I grew up calling these residual flesh habits, the "old sin nature." This is just another way of talking about the flesh or the unrenewed soul. Some argue that we no longer have a sinful nature. Just think of this in terms of the reality you and I experience. This is the point of Romans chapter 6 where Paul wonders why he keeps on doing things he shouldn't do and doesn't do the things he should do. You and I do have a sin nature residing within us in our soul. If you have a problem with that terminology, just think of the word "flesh" when I say "old sin nature". My only problem with the term "flesh" is that it can mistakenly lead to a belief that your body is the problem and that it is somehow evil. The "flesh" is your soul that is contained in your body. Your spirit, which is a new creation, is now desirous to please God and operate in a way that desires close communion with Him. That is the new spirit within you. Your soul/flesh/old sin nature gets distracted and will again and again come against the things that God desires for you. This doesn't mean that you are not saved.

After salvation, our relationship with sin is indeed very different. We are no longer slaves to sin. When you read Paul's letter to the Romans, it can be very confusing. When we read something like the passage below, it seems contradictory.

*⁵ If we've become united with him in a death like his, certainly we will also be united with him when we come back to life as he did. ⁶ We know that the person we used to be was crucified with him to put an end to sin in our bodies. **Because of this we are no longer slaves to sin.** ⁷ The person who has died has been freed from sin. (Romans 6:1-7 NKJV)*

Paul is saying, WE NOW HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE CAPABILITY TO RESIST THE FLESH. Before we were saved, we couldn't even resist that "sin nature" or that "flesh" that remained within us. But now, because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are no

longer slaves to sin. But sin is still present in our lives. In the mid 1800's there was a branch of teaching that arose that goes under the name of the "Holiness" movement. Some of you grew up in the holiness movement. It basically teaches that as a "new creation" you no longer have the capacity or the urge to sin. This has destructive implications.

If we no longer have a sin nature, then when a person who on occasion desires to do wrong (and one may from time to time) that person will begin to question whether or not they were ever saved to begin with. This is very destructive. It gives birth to a form of legalism. It is what is called the belief in "sinless perfection".

The fact of the matter is that even after you were saved, you'll continue sinning. The penalty for these sins was all paid for at the cross. You (your spirit) stands "righteous" before God, but you are still a sinner. Why? Because you're still on planet earth. Praise God you're no longer a slave to sin as you once were. You have the power of the Holy Spirit residing in you which is greater than the propensity to sin which remains within you. You have hope. There is no need to despair.

When you sin, and you will continue sinning, If you say you don't then the Word of God says you are a liar. Your soul is not yet transformed completely into its Christ-Likeness. It is a mistake to confuse your identity in Christ with references to your conduct. The term "sinner" is not univocal (it doesn't mean one narrow specific thing). That means it is a word with a broad meaning. The New Testament doesn't identify Christians as "sinners" but it is clear that we still have sin in our lives. An accurate way to describe you and me is to say that we are now "saints who occasionally sin". Why is that? Because each of us is encouraged to "walk in a manner worthy of our calling." Our spirit is a new creation, but our soul is being transformed as we speak. ⁸ *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.** (2 Corinthians 3:18 NKJV)*

For those who are new to the faith, I want to encourage you that when you still sin, don't be afraid that you somehow were never saved. Your soul is going through the transformation process. The Apostle John tells you that when you do sin (and you will), simply admit it to God, and agree with Him that what you have done is outside of His desire and will for you. John tells us that He continues to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9) You might hear, "Oh no, what if I forget a sin will I be forgiven?" This is a narrow view and is an illogical simplistic argument given the totality of scripture. The penalty for all of your sins was paid for at the cross, but you still have the capacity to sin. That is not your identity, but it is your realistic biblical condition as a human while you're on earth. Don't get identity confused with behavior.

Paul says that physical circumcision alone was insufficient to please God who told of the need for our hearts to be "circumcised." Paul says, "²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; ²⁹ but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. (Romans 2:29 NKJV) It is the matters of the heart (where the soul and the mind meet) that matter to God.

The "cutting away of the flesh" is the moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, year by year process of presenting your body as a living sacrifice and not being conformed to the world, but being transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Romans 12:1-2)

In summary, Christians retain the capacity to sin, but we are in an eternal state of "righteousness" because of Jesus' work on the cross. Even while we continue to struggle with sin and the renewal of our minds, Jesus gives us a new identity and guarantees that we will be with Him forever. The renewed spirit within you hungers after righteousness and closeness to the Father. Your soul isn't so predisposed to righteousness. What distinguishes us from "mere sinners" is that our faith in Jesus has established a place in heaven with Him forever, and our identity in Him and our renewed spirit create within our spirit a desire for godliness, and we engage in an active pursuit of that through regular self-examination and the practice of repetitive repentance.

Let us pray.