

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we ask for the courage to worship You and to live the life of faith whatever lies before us. Give us patience as we listen for Your word, understanding when we hear it, and enthusiasm to put it into practice, wherever it may lead. May we then discover the delights of being Your true servants, and the joy of living within Your will: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Consider praying briefly under each of these four headings, using the suggestions as you see fit

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord for the blessing of health, and the wisdom to keep yourself healthy

2. For your friends and family

Give thanks for those who have treated you well over the years

3. For the church and its work

Pray for your church minister and officers / deacons etc.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Continue to pray for Libya as the country faces immense change.

Meditation

Did You look upon the people, Lord
and see the hunger in their eyes?
Did You know who would walk with You
and who would choose their own way?

Did You hope that those who turned away
would turn again to you, one day,
And not reject Your Word forever?

Or did you know
through how they looked at You
that in their souls resided either hate or love
And every time You sought them out
Your very being them
to shout out 'Yes',
or turn away with a definite 'No'!

There, in front of you ...
elation and rejection standing there.
You knew the consequences of the Gospel
through and through ...
You always took the 'Yes'
and let the 'No' just walk away.

For love accepts the choices made
it grieves the sadness of a 'No'
yet loves the glorious fruit of 'Yes',
eternally ensured,
from now till all is said and done, forever.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 17:23-27

²³ Then on that very day, according to God's command, Abraham took his son Ishmael and every other male from his household, both born in his house and bought with his money, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins. ²⁴ Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in this way, ²⁵ and Ishmael his son was 13 years old when he too was circumcised. ²⁶ They were circumcised on the same day ²⁷ together with all the men of his house, both born in his household and bought from foreigners. They were all circumcised with him at the same time.

Review

Genesis 17 as a whole is an extraordinary passage of scripture in which God formalised His Covenant. He did this by emphatically re-stating his own commitment to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. He would make them into a great nation, so that through them the world would be blessed (12:2,3; 17:1-8). He then commanded Abraham to circumcise the men in his household, and seal the Covenant (17:9-14). Lastly, He declared that the Covenant would be fulfilled when Sarah became pregnant and had a son called Isaac (17:15-22). God had now revealed everything, and all that was required was for Abraham to carry out the circumcision, in obedience. This is what is described in today's passage.

The opening words of v23 are *'then on that very day'*, which indicate that Abraham was quick to respond to the powerful conversation he had just finished with God. After being in Canaan for around 15 years, and with Ishmael at 13 years of age, he had waited a long time for the day when God would begin to fulfil His promise. Now, he did what he was told with urgency; words were finished, and now was the time for action. Up to this point in time, Abraham had offered God his worship and his faith, and had given these without any compulsion from God; indeed, this is what had impressed God when He declared him 'righteous' (ch15:6). Faith and worship would continue to be the measure of a person's response to God in the Bible, but Abraham now demonstrates his obedience as well, and thereby hastened the day when the Covenant would be fulfilled. He raced to do what was required!

This could well be regarded as a turning point in history, for in this moment, a divine command about God's Covenant plan of Salvation was met by a faithful human response. This is what had happened before when Noah went into the Ark (7:13) and also when Abraham had accepted God's first command to go to Canaan (12:1ff). It would also happen later in history when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt (Ex.12:17,41,51). These were all Old Testament events in which the Covenant was put into effect through obedience; however, the whole New Testament focuses on the one unique moment when Jesus was obedient to God's Covenant even to death on the Cross. Now, after Jesus' work and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's plan of Salvation is carried forward through our faithful response to His commands, and we have the light of Jesus to show us the way, which people like Abraham and Moses did not. But there is no mistaking the excitement we all feel when we see things happening which take forward God's work in the world, even though such moments are often surrounded by periods of waiting and faithfulness.

In the rest of the study today we will explore further the meaning of both circumcision and the Covenant. The text today says little about the details of the circumcisions performed on that day (apart from emphasising that it was done exactly as God commanded), so it is an appropriate moment to consider afresh what each might teach us about our relationship with God.

Going Deeper

- Circumcision
- Covenant

Circumcision

Circumcision is largely taken for granted in the Bible from this point forward, but there is evidence of an on-going general connection between obedience and circumcision. This is seen in passages such as this from Jeremiah *'keep your covenant with me and circumcise yourselves'* (Jer 4:4). This connection may seem obvious from what we have read in Genesis, where Abraham was required to be obedient when he did the first circumcision. However, in the wider history of the Old Testament, a gradual and subtle change took place whereby both these became connected not with Abraham, but with Moses. An early story of Moses was regarded by some as the origins of circumcision (Ex 4:24ff), and Moses gave the Law, which of course

required obedience. Circumcision then became regarded as a mark of someone who was obedient to the Law of Moses, and both were thought of as essential to the identity of God's people. Joshua, for example, had to ensure that the people who entered the Promised Land were all circumcised (Josh 5:2ff), and when he had finished giving the tribes their inheritance, he called them all together to celebrate a great 'Covenant' (Josh 24).

Around the time of Christ, this connection was very strong in people's minds, which is why it crops up in a number of places, for example, Christian Jews tried to insist to the early church in Jerusalem that *'it is necessary for them (Gentiles) to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Laws of Moses'* (Acts 15:5). This was thrown out by the church assembly, principally by Peter (Acts 15:19ff) and this caused no small controversy. The problem for these Christian Jews was that they connected faith with being obedient to God, and with the Laws of Moses, and with circumcision, and they could not comprehend one without the other. This is why Paul expended much energy and a considerable amount of time in his letters explaining that obedience and circumcision did not originally come from Moses, but from Abraham, as in our passage of Genesis 17 (see Romans 4 and Galatians 3). He was able to explain, as we have already seen, that the roots of Abraham's obedience to God in performing the act of circumcision lay in his faith (15:6) and his worship (17:3), and Paul's letters also expound a morality which is generally very close to that of God's prior command to Abraham *'walk before me and be blameless'* (17:1). Paul was concerned to explain to people the new 'sign' of the Covenant, the death and resurrection of Jesus (see 1 Cor. 2,3), and argued against all else.

Circumcision has been variously explained as beneficial for 1) health and preventing infection 2) purification before God 3) for teaching about procreation and future generations 4) for improving fertility (from the Jewish philosopher Philo, Special Laws, 1:2-11). These teachings reflect views which started within Judaism and have grown and developed over the years, but none of them have any connection with scriptures. Even the implied connection between circumcision and the fertility of Abraham and Sarah is, if anything, played down completely in scripture. God was the only provider of fertility, and it would be contrary to everything scripture teaches to suggest that any 'rite' performed by men or women might be responsible in any way for the conception and birth of any child. Fertility is God's territory alone.

For all these reasons, and others, circumcision no longer has a place in the life of God's people, though its use in Old Testament times was originally intended not as a reminder of the Mosaic Law, but of God's Covenant relationship with His people, first expressed by the promise of God to Abraham and his response to that Covenant in faith, worship and obedience. For Christians, its use today is limited to personal preference and medical necessity.

Covenant

It is much easier to talk of the importance of the Covenant of God in Old Testament times. It was a Covenant which was eventually broken, and never established the witness to the world that God wanted from it, but nevertheless provided a basis for the New Covenant which God made in Jesus Christ, as explained in the New Testament (e.g. Hebrews 8&9). We have already seen that faith, obedience and worship are central to our Covenant relationship with God, and this would be agreed upon by most Christians. What the Old Testament can teach us in addition to this comes from a number of other words which are used in close connection with 'Covenant', and they tell us a great deal, both about the nature of our Covenant God, and the kind of response He expects of us who enter into a Covenant relationship with Him.

Probably the most important word is the Hebrew 'cheseth', which is variously translated as 'covenant loyalty', 'covenant love', 'faithful love', 'steadfast love' etc. In English, these words are littered throughout the Psalms, for example; *'great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.'* (Psalm 117:2). The word 'Covenant' does not occur in this psalm, but the word 'cheseth' does and it really means something like this; 'love which is on-going and will never fail'. This is, of course, a property of God, for He will never go back on His word, however, it is important for us to notice that whenever we read the words 'steadfast love' or similar in the Old Testament, what is being talked about is the love of God expressed through His Covenant. Once this is known, it is almost impossible to read the Old Testament, especially the prophets, and not notice this frequent and powerful word.

Other words of similar significance are these: 1) the Hebrew 'ahav', meaning undeserved love, a quality of God, for example, when His people continue to sin against Him, as in *'I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.'* (Hosea 11:4); 2) the Hebrew 'shalom' which is well known, and does indeed have the popular meaning of peace and wholeness, but is also closely connected with the Covenant in the Old Testament, meaning the peace which God alone can give through His Covenant; as in *'so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God'* (Gen 28:21). These are just some of the words that evoke the Covenant in scripture, and they help our interpretation of the text because of their

close connection both to the properties of our Covenant God, and also to the qualities of love to which we aspire because they are shown us in Jesus.

Discipleship

Application

Most of the references to 'Covenant' in the book of Genesis are in chapter 17. We cannot read the Old Testament, however, without being aware of the importance of this Covenant, and what God's purposes for it are. The theme crops up frequently, not least in the Psalms and the works of the major prophets (Psalm 105:8ff; Is 56:4ff; Jer 31:31ff; Ez 37:26ff). Circumcision, however, is hardly mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament, and most other references to it are negative, as when the Bible speaks of 'the uncircumcised', meaning the Gentiles. The New Testament, as we have seen, does talk about it because it became an issue for early Christians.

Abraham's obedience to God in our reading today is, in this sense, the end of the discussion of Covenant and circumcision in Genesis. It is not the end of the story however, for the consequences of Genesis 17 follow through into the following chapters. The next chapter we will read contains the famous story in which Abraham and Sarah received strangers who brought the same message to Sarah that Abraham already had. Then, a few chapters further on, we will read about Abraham's final Covenant test as he responds to the command to hand his son over to God, initially in the form of a sacrifice, and ultimately, a living sacrifice (Gen 22). It is a test that examined Abraham's faith, his worship and his love of both God and his son, and a test of whether the Covenant had really taken root in the life of Abraham and his descendants.

In scripture generally, the Covenant has been revealed and accepted through the obedience, faith and worship of Abraham. God has set His seal to work through the people of His choice to bring His light into the world. The story of 'what happens next' is the salvation story of all scripture, and nothing averts God from His task. It is now made real through Jesus Christ, and the only question lies over the faithfulness, obedience and worship of all of us who follow in Abraham's footsteps.

Questions for groups

1. Why was God was insistent on the circumcision of all the males in Abraham's household, and not just his immediate family?
2. Has the practice of circumcision anything to teach us today? If not, what can we take from its use in the Old Testament?
3. Did you know that the Covenant was important to the whole Bible, as explained in these chapters of Genesis? Why is it not preached about today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself about how you express your faith in visible practical ways? How do other people know that you are a Christian, and how can you testify to your faith in more effective ways?*
- *Pray about the way in which God's people are divided by their understanding of the things of faith, and ask God to bless His people with a desire to listen to His Word and seek their inherent unity with other believers.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, You have planned all things with great care and attention to detail, yet we so often break the best laid plans apart because of our inability to understand Your Word. Come upon us by the power of Your Holy Spirit, so that Your purposes are fulfilled in us even now; conform our hearts to Your will, we pray, AMEN
