

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; we are sorry that we do not value sufficiently highly the wonderful gift of family life. Bless us as we live together, and make us creative in our worship of You at home. Forgive us our sins, in particular the distress we cause each other when we upset those we love through self-centredness or lack of care. Raise us up by Your Salvation and bring us to Your eternal home O Lord: AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas** *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

*Pray today about your own ability to maintain good relationships with others. Ask the Lord to help you be more discerning about who you spend time with (outside your family,) and why.*

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray about Aid, and Aid agencies.** *Pray for the many voluntary workers who are involved with Aid agencies. Without them such work could not be done*
- *Give thanks to God for the food you are able to grow and eat*
- *Pray for your national leaders, your representatives in government, who are responsible for passing laws to regulate and protect your people*

### Meditation

Come, my friend, and worship the Lord:  
For He will accept you just as you are.

Bring your life and confess all your sins:  
For the Lord will hear your heart and forgive.

Bring your hopes and your precious dreams:  
For the Lord will fulfil His purposes in You.

Bring your songs and be released in praise:  
For the Lord will be glorified in His heaven.

Bring your ears to attend to His Word:  
For the Lord will lead You into all truth.

Bring your prayers for yourself and for others:  
For the Lord will give you His answers in love.

Bring your desire to follow in His ways:  
For the Lord will bless each step you take.

Go, my friend, having worshipped the Lord:  
For He will be with you wherever you go.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 17: 9-14

<sup>9</sup> God said to Abraham,

‘As for you, you must agree to keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you, which must be kept: every male among you must be

circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> Throughout the generations to come every one of your males will be circumcised when he is eight days old, including those born in your household or bought with your money from a foreigner not of your descent: <sup>13</sup> they must be circumcised; those born in your household or bought with your money. This will then be a physical sign that my covenant with you is to be an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any male who remains uncircumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'

## Review

This passage of scripture is not one that preachers will readily preach upon in church on Sundays! God's command to Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household is one of the Old Testament texts we do find easy to read or understand, and few people give the passage much time or attention. However, this passage describes the institution of circumcision as the ancient God-given sign of the Covenant; and it is very important, because it is given by God to the descendants of Abraham forever. It is not a subject which Christians wish to discuss, because as soon as they read what Paul says about circumcision in Galatians, they feel that Paul has given a sufficient scriptural reason to dismiss the whole unpleasant matter of circumcision from their minds 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.' (Galatians 5:6)

However, as Paul points out elsewhere (2 Tim 3:16) 'All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.' We must therefore be prepared to consider what God meant by commanding Abraham and his descendants to do this, whatever sensibilities we might have about the subject!

The first thing to notice about today's scripture reading is that it is remarkably lacking in detail about circumcision itself. All it says is 'you are to circumcise the flesh of your foreskins', and apart from making reference to this again at the end, the rest of the text is all about the meaning of the circumcision, rather than the details of what was done. In a recent filmed biography of Nelson Mandela, he described his own circumcision in somewhat more graphic detail as a proud rite of passage for young men at puberty. Personally, I found his detailed description of what was done to him excruciating; it made me wince far more than the words of this passage!

Circumcision at puberty is common in many countries and has been throughout time, and in Abraham's day the practice was indeed common, though performed differently and for different reasons in different cultures. The difference between such tribal circumcision and the circumcision God commanded was twofold. Firstly, it was done at eight days old (Not at puberty, for example) to indicate the inclusion of the youngest of children within God's Covenant people. The reason for this was important; life itself was a gift of God, and a child was the evidence of God's Covenant promise that He would 'multiply' Abraham's descendants (Gen 12:2,3; 15:1,5,6; 17:1-8). Secondly, the sign of circumcision was to be a physical expression of the spiritual reality of faith in God, and an expression of the unique relationship between God and His people, through Abraham.

Much of the language of Genesis 17:9-14 is highly repetitive, and we shall look at this and what it means in the main Bible study; certainly, the repetition indicates the importance of circumcision to the descendants of Abraham. Despite the very different feelings created by the whole subject of circumcision today, this passage does in fact contain an important principle of faith, which is that although God's relationship (or 'Covenant') with His people is something He creates and for which He is responsible (as we have already seen in the descriptions of it so far in Genesis), God needs us to signify our acceptance and compliance in specific ways. He requires that we both respond to Him in faith and also through a physical sign. Today, the Christian church has been given a different sign to indicate faith; and this is Baptism, as administered by John, received by Jesus and as Jesus commanded His disciples to offer when preaching the Gospel (Matt 28:19). Unfortunately, despite the almost universal practice of baptism amongst Christians throughout history, even this is a subject of no small controversy!

## Going Deeper

- Circumcision in Genesis 17
- The sign of circumcision
- What does this mean for us?

The subject of circumcision is not easy, but is it important for us to understand how the promises that were made by God have carried through to us today. A deeper understanding of the whole subject will help us deal with issues such as God's faithfulness and baptism in a more helpful way.

### ***Circumcision in Genesis 17***

Genesis 17 is a substantial chapter of Genesis, and it gives a full description of the Old Testament Covenant of God with Abraham and his descendants. The majority of the chapter, including this passage, is a speech of God to Abraham; and in it, God tells Abraham that whilst He has initiated the Covenant He requires Abraham to respond to it formally. In verses 1-8 God repeated the formal promises of the Covenant (see yesterday's study), and added a number of important insights to the whole scenario, including further assurances about the promise of land. Abram responded to God's presence by bowing down in worship (17:3) and was renamed 'Abraham' in order to mark the significance of the moment and by way of pointing to the future (17:5). However, the first part of God's speech was all focussed on God's Covenant initiative, and now Genesis moves on to say more about what was required of Abraham

Now, in our passage today, the focus changes completely. This is immediately indicated by God's words addressed to Abraham; 'as for you, you must agree to keep my Covenant ...' (17:9). God wanted more from Abraham than his faith and his worship (15:6, 17:3), he wanted to see the evidence of his obedience in the next step of obedience to the practice of circumcision (17:11). Before God gave instruction about how this was to be done, a large part of each of verses 9 and 10 are identical in Hebrew, and this repetition is a form of emphasis, which it is difficult to convey when translating the text as it stands. God repeats himself to ensure we do not miss His purpose, which is that He will do His work of salvation through His chosen people, who must be obedient to Him and what He calls them to do. This applies to both Abraham in the Old Testament and to those of us who inherit the same promises through Jesus Christ, now.

### ***The sign of circumcision***

The removal of the foreskin of the male sexual organ sounds to us like as a primitive way of making a covenant sign between God and His chosen people. We should not be so quick to judge, however, because the meaning of this sign becomes more obvious the more we look at what scripture says. God promised Abraham children, which had not yet been forthcoming through his marriage to Sarah. This sign in his sexual organ would be a reminder that only God could give the life He promised, for up to this point in Abraham's 99 years, his sex life had not been fruitful for God. In the same way, every male of God's people would be reminded in their own sexual organ that God was both the giver of life, and the guarantee of their future, through their descendants. It was also a reminder to them that God placed strict guidelines upon sexual activity, as we can see in the laws given to Moses later by God to express the Covenant (Lev 18,20). There is a highly moral sexual code of practice implicit within both circumcision and the later law codes which put to shame the somewhat lax standards applied by many (but not all) Christians today. It is also worth saying that there is no mention or justification of the obscene practice of female circumcision anywhere in the Bible. Any decent claim to morality surely forbids it.

If this is the meaning of circumcision given to Abraham, then when performed, it would indicate to God the acceptance of the Covenant. Up to this point, the Covenant was something God had made and set up; that is why He so frequently called it 'my Covenant'. Abraham's previous faith and worship were his natural response to Almighty God (17:3), but here was a specific action which now required him to express his faith through practical obedience. It is noticeable that God gave very few direct commands to Abraham, but when He did, He expected him to be completely obedient because He had chosen him and revealed Himself to him. In fact, it is only at the end of Genesis 17, after further lengthy discussions and revelations, that Abraham is finally obedient, performing the rite of circumcision on himself and all the men and male children of his household, as commanded.

In verse 12 there is a further requirement for circumcision which is highly significant. It was to be done for children from eight days old. A number of scriptures reflect the belief that the first seven days of the life of a child or an animal was bound up with its mother, and it was only on the eighth day that a child or animal could be regarded as an independent creation of God, and therefore capable of being dedicated to God (see, for example Exodus 22:29-30). In this way, when a child was eight days old it was considered to have survived the traumas of birth and was therefore ready to be dedicated as a member of God's Covenant people on the eighth day (v12). Some scholars also think that this symbolises seven days of creation by God, and the eighth day was therefore the true start of human life – but this theory has a number of glaring problems, and is debatable! The general point is clear, which is that under the spiritual authority of the parents, a child over eight days old was considered to be a part of the Covenant people of God, and the responsibility lay with the parents alone to bring the child up in a manner which enabled them to understand their heritage and the Covenant promises of God.

### ***What does this mean for us?***

In the last part of the passage, God promised that the sign of circumcision would be a sign of His Covenant with Abraham's descendants, and would be 'everlasting'. The Hebrew word from which this comes ('yolam')

is used both here and in many places within the Laws of Moses, and is often translated as 'in perpetuity' (e.g. Lev 25:23, Numbers 18:8 etc). However, the word simply means 'a very long period of time' and is used to refer to the past as well as the future! It is also quite different from the words which in both Old and New Testaments are translated; 'for ever and ever' (e.g. 2 Tim 4:18, Rev 1:6). Because of this, those of us who have found faith today feel able to say that the practice of circumcision undoubtedly continues for those who are of physical descent from Abraham, but its 'perpetuity' for us is found in a new sign relevant to the New Covenant found in Christ, and this does not cut across the idea that what God was doing here in this text was 'everlasting'.

Despite the importance of this text, the Old Testament makes the point many times over that mere physical obedience to the Covenant or to the Law, is not enough. Circumcision and the practice of formal religion do not necessarily please God. Circumcision came after Abraham had responded to God through faith and worship, and these two things lie at the heart of Abraham's relationship with God, and ours. We should not think that only the New Testament says this! Deut. 10:16 says 'Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and be no longer stiff-necked' (also Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ez. 44:7-9 etc). God always wants to see us being obedient to what he says, but from the earliest of times, He has examined the heart!

The sign for Christians is now baptism, as is clear from Paul's writing in Colossians 'In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.' (Col 2:11,12, see also Rom 6:1-14; 11:16; 1 Cor 7:14; 1 Peter 3:20 etc.). Whilst many Christians today are far more convinced of the importance of 'believers baptism' for adults, our passage together with the references I have given, makes it clear why most early Christians opted for infant baptism as a sign of the Covenant love of God for all children under the spiritual headship of the Christian parents, and their acceptance, through the parents, within the Kingdom. They did this because it made sense to them as a replacement for the important and everlasting sign of 'circumcision'. The Church then had to find a way of making sure that the sign of baptism was accepted by children as they grew up, and they did this through a ceremony which is now called 'confirmation'.

All of the arguments about adult or infant baptism within the Church come down to our understanding of the Covenant relationship we have with God, and the sign of baptism which replaces circumcision. Although there are very good reasons for adopting a policy of adult baptism today, it is unhelpful if those who advocate this will not accept the scriptural fact that baptism is in part, a replacement for circumcision.

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## Discipleship

### Application

I have not avoided either the subject of circumcision or the spiritual consequences of this passage. This has a significant bearing on the life of the Church today through the very deep differences between Christians concerning Baptism and the appropriate way to include children in the life of the church today, something which should reflect our Covenant relationship with God. This is all very important. Circumcision was required of Abraham as a physical sign of God's Covenant with His people, centuries before the time of Christ. It was God's purpose to bless all the nations through His people, so it was important that they be fertile and reproduce in a way that physically represented the Covenant relationship they had with God. That said, the Old Testament is clear that what God wanted from His people was a response of the heart, of faith and of worship. It is tragic that Christians argue today about the practice of baptism; whether infant or adult. God has given us the 'outward sign' of water baptism instead of circumcision, but He still looks at the heart. Unless we understand that, even the sign of baptism, adult or infant, is meaningless.

I fear that our inability to be understanding of each other in this important matter means that in too many places children are not brought up and nurtured as part of the Covenant people of God as God has clearly intended. Too much children's work in churches is done as some kind of evangelistic mission rather than a work of nurture within the family of God's people. Both are required, and we need to know the difference between the two. In my opinion, the growth of the church means that there should always be a place for adult baptism by full immersion within any church. In addition, because of the divided history of our churches, it is vital that all God's people treat with pastoral understanding the feelings of parents about the manner in which they wish to bring up their children, whether through infant baptism followed by confirmation, or by water baptism at the point of personal decision making.

Finally, implicit within the text today is a discussion of our Covenant relationship with God in terms of male circumcision. Whilst discussing this it may seem that women are excluded because circumcision does not

apply to them. I must point out that tomorrow, we will see where Sarah fits into the whole story of Covenant faithfulness, and this will tell us more.

## Questions for groups

1. What does the practice of circumcision tell us about the faith of God's people in Old Testament times?
2. Do you agree with the connection made in this study between circumcision and baptism? What does this tell us?
3. On the basis of this study, is infant baptism an appropriate way for God's covenant to be expressed within Christian families?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Take time to reflect on what baptism means to you in the light of the discussion of the Covenant in today's text, and its replacement of circumcision in the life of the church.*
- *Pray for any people you know who are being baptised at whatever age. Pray that they will make their own decisions and follow Christ with great zeal and love.*

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## Final Prayer

This is my prayer, Lord Jesus Christ; may I both be open to Your healing power, Lord God, and a minister of this same grace to others; and may Your church be the same and so fulfil its call. I ask this through Jesus Christ, the great Healer and Saviour of our souls. AMEN

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