

Symbolism of Circumcision

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Without giving it a great deal of thought, the act of being circumcised seems harsh or primitive. However, upon closer examination of God's word, this practice provides an important insight to the wisdom of God as it applies to fallible and sinful mankind.

Although there are numerous scriptures pertaining to the subject of circumcision, this study will focus on a national version that occurred under Joshua.

*Now the people came up from the Jordan **on the tenth day of the first month**, and they camped in Gilgal on the east side of Jericho (Jos. 4:19; NKJV used throughout unless otherwise noted; emphasis added).*

The act of setting this nation aside for a special purpose on the 10th day of the first month is to make a connection with the physical Passover lamb that was set aside at the same time.

*Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, **'On the tenth day of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb,** according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household' (Ex. 12:3; emphasis added).*

This lamb was to be slaughtered, late in the day, on the fourteenth of this first month (Ex. 12:6) and its shed blood was to foreshadow the blood of Jesus Christ, which provided forgiveness to repentant sinners (cf. Heb. 9:22).

*Knowing that you (repentant sinner) were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹but with **the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb without blemish and without spot***

(sinless) (1Pet. 1:18-19; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

There is nothing more valuable than one's life, and scripture confirms that giving this up is not natural or easy to do.

*.....Yes, **all that a man has he will give for his life** (Job 2:4b; emphasis added).*

*For **no one ever hated his own flesh**, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church (Eph. 5:29; emphasis added).*

As many of the males present in Gilgal were adults, the act of removing a very sensitive and private part of their body could not have been easy. To say it would have been emotionally charged is an understatement. Nonetheless, in this very stressful situation they obeyed God's command through Joshua.

*At that time the Lord said to Joshua, "Make flint knives for yourself, and circumcise the sons of Israel again the second time." ³So Joshua made flint knives for himself, and circumcised the sons of Israel at the hill of the foreskins. ⁴And **this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them:** All the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way, after they had come out of Egypt. ⁵For **all the people who came out had been circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness on the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised** (Jos. 5:2-5; emphasis added).*

At this point, it is very important to make the connection between the name Joshua and that of Jesus because one was responsible for fulfilling the physical aspect of circumcision, while the other was responsible for fulfilling the spiritual aspect.

Meaning of Joshua: *the name was a common alternative form of the Hebrew name yesua, which corresponds to the Greek spelling iesous, from which, through the Latin iesus, comes the English spelling Jesus. The name Jesus means "God is salvation", which fits Christ's action as he fulfilled the will of his heavenly Father (cf. Mt. 26:38, 42, 44).*

Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God (the Father) raised from the dead, by him this man stands here before you whole (Ac. 4:10; Ed. note in parenthesis).

Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Ac. 4:12; emphasis added).

So while Joshua was responsible for the physical act of circumcising the adult males in ancient Israel, Jesus Christ was responsible for offering himself as an atonement, or "covering" for sin, that would make "circumcision of the heart" possible for every repentant sinner. This will be examined in more detail shortly.

The pain and discomfort of being circumcised, which was a prerequisite to participation in the first covenant, cannot be compared to the pain and anguish that Jesus Christ experienced when he was tortured and killed as the prerequisite to the second covenant. So one of the reasons for circumcision was to foreshadow Christ's suffering, even though the pain of circumcision cannot be compared to what Christ experienced the day of his crucifixion.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit (of Almighty God)

(1Pet. 3:18; cf. Rom. 8:11; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added; emphasis added).

The act of removing and discarding a very sensitive and personal part of one's body, in order to have a close relationship with Almighty God during the first covenant, foreshadowed Christ's entire body being removed and discarded through his death, which provided "the way" to a second covenant with Almighty God.

Jesus said to him (Thomas), "I am the way, the truth, and the life (everlasting). No one comes to the Father except through me (Christ's sacrifice) (Jn. 14:6; Ed. notes in parentheses).

This second covenant is based on better promises; the primary being everlasting life following a sincere and willing repentance of sin (cf. Heb. 8:6). The act of repentance is referred to figuratively as "circumcision of the heart", and this teaching was known during the first covenant period.

Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked (stubbornly rebellious) no longer (Dt. 10:16; cf. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).

This first covenant instruction was reiterated in the writings of the second covenant.

...he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit (willingness to obey God's word; cf. Mt. 4:4), *and not in the letter* (self-justification through animal sacrifices/ordinances); *whose praise is not from men but from God* (cf. Mt. 23:5) (Rom. 2:29b; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

Going back to the national circumcision under Joshua, the adult males rested and were healed between the 10th and 14th day of the first month of that year. Then they sacrificed the Passover lamb, which foreshadowed the death of the Lamb of Almighty God, Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:29; 36).

So the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho (Jos. 5:10).

Central to their instruction during this Passover was "the Lord" using this experience as a teaching tool.

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away (SHD 1556; removed, transferred from one to another) the reproach of Egypt from you." Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal (rolling) to this day (Jos. 5:9; Ed. notes in parentheses).

Specifically, the discarded foreskins represented the stubbornness central to the sins of Egypt, and as these sins were so close and personal to Israel, it required God's intervention for them to be removed and discarded. The ultimate fulfillment of this activity came when Christ willingly gave up his entire body on a wooden stake in order for every repentant sinner to have his/her sins removed and discarded.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Ps. 103:12).

*But You have lovingly delivered my soul (living being) from the pit of corruption (everlasting death), for **You have cast all my sins behind Your back** (Isa. 38:17b; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).*

*I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and **I will not remember your sins** (Isa. 43:25; emphasis added).*

*But now, once at the end of the ages, **he** (Christ) **has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself** (Heb. 9:26b; Ed. note in parenthesis; emphasis added).*

*So **Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many...** (Heb. 9:28a; emphasis added).*

After observing the Passover under Joshua, the nation of Israel was allowed to start eating the new produce of the land that was promised to their forefathers.

And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain (roasted), on the very same day. ¹²Now the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land; and the children of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate the food of the land of Canaan that year (Jos. 5:11-12; Ed. note in parenthesis).

Therefore, having their sins discarded/forgiven, they could now start a new life in a new land that was blessed with abundance.

And it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, ¹¹houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant; when you have eaten and are full – ¹²then beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (Dt. 6:10-12).

In like manner, when God Almighty and his son Jesus Christ have done everything for us, all we

have to do is willingly repent for living contrary to the law and commandments (cf. Eccl. 12:13-14). Following this, we can inherit the blessing of a new life which will last forever.

*Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death (our old way of doing things was discarded upon repentance), that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory (power) of the Father, even so **we also should walk in newness of life** (Rom. 6:4; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).*

So the new produce in the new land foreshadowed a new way of living, following the removal/disposal of our old way of doing things. This removal/disposal was symbolized by the removal/disposal of the foreskins of each adult male. Having started this journey, we are not to turn back to the old sinful practices associated figuratively with the land of Egypt.

Knowing this, that our old man was crucified (figuratively) with him (Christ), that the body of sin (symbolically associated with the discarded foreskins) might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. ⁷For he who has died has been freed (cleared) from sin (Rom. 6:6; Ed. notes in parentheses).

But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you (re)turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage (Gal. 4:9; cf. Heb. 10:26; Ed. note in parenthesis).

Finally, the sins that were an integral part of us were "rolled away" and transferred temporarily onto Jesus Christ. This is why the name Gilgal is so important because it describes this "rolling away" of our sins and their subsequent transference to the one who agreed to take them, in our place, so we could be spared everlasting death (Rev. 13:8; cf. Rom. 6:23).

*But he was wounded (pierced through) for our transgressions, he was bruised (crushed) for our iniquities; **the chastisement for our peace** (reconciliation with God the Father) **was upon him**, and by his stripes (blows that cut in) we are healed (forgiven upon repentance) (Isa. 53:5; Ed. notes in parentheses).*

And being found in appearance as a man, he (Christ) humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Gr. *stauros*; upright wooden stake).

So the symbolism of removing a foreskin is a vivid reminder that sin is an integral part of every human being, and our carnal nature does not want to give it up (cf. Rom. 8:7). However, it needs to be removed before we can have a close relationship with God the Father, and the only way this can happen is for a sinless individual to act so "the foreskin of our hearts" can be removed. In other words, our stubborn and rebellious attitudes need to be removed and replaced with a willingness to obey every word of God. Thankfully, Jesus Christ made this possible by giving up his life (cf. Jn. 10:18).

In conclusion, Joshua was responsible for overseeing the physical circumcision of all adult males in ancient Israel, while Jesus Christ is responsible for overseeing the spiritual circumcision of everyone's heart/attitude toward Almighty God (cf. Jn. 6:37-40).

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