

**Genesis 15-17**

**Covenant and Circumcision**

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People from all cultural and social backgrounds throughout the generations have struggled to understand the Old Testament. It usually leaves the reader with more unanswered questions- is the world six thousand years old or millions (even billions) of years old; what does it mean someone walked with God then no more; can donkeys really talk; how did Saul wipe out a people group just to interact with them in the next sentences? For many modern readers, Genesis 17 proves just as mysterious- is there just one covenant God made with Abraham or two (or even three); is the land of Canaan (modern day Israel) promised in an eternal covenant between God and Abraham still in effect today; are the physical descendants of Abraham only God's people, why did God make men cut off the foreskin of their penis' in order to prove their allegiance to Him? This paper will answer some of these questions by providing an exegesis of Genesis 17 and its surrounding context, identifying and discussing some of its major theological themes and how they are interwoven into meta narrative of Genesis, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, as well as apply its significant theological themes to ministry and life today.

As way of introduction, it is important to share my approach to reading and interpreting Scripture that will aid the reader throughout this paper. First, I read the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) as a unified story. For example, I believe the narrative of creation on the first pages of the Bible link directly to the covenant work of God on Mount Sinai and the temple consecration by Samuel, all the way through to the renewed heaven and earth in Revelation 21 and 22. When one reads any given event in Scripture apart from its context within the overall narrative, they are at risk to missing the authors intent, and consequently, God's wisdom.

Secondly, I believe the unified story of the Old Testament literary forms a historical narrative (including in it poetry and discourse). This means that the reader must not only look at Scriptures' stories its historical setting but also how the author recounts, selects, and arranges the

events in the overall framework of the story. For example, rather than attempt to explain what role the slaughter of the red heifer may have played in the religious life of ancient Israel, we should be interested why the author included the ritual and why he placed it where he did in the story.<sup>1</sup> Understanding these paradigms better suite the reader to see and experience the themes, purpose, and structures of Scripture.

Third, I believe the biblical texts are shaped, constructed, and influenced by an author(s). This means the reader is subject to the authors' intent and must, therefore, make it the goal to reveal what the author meant by the text. Old Testament theologian, John Sailhamer, proves helpful on this topic, saying "as readers of these biblical texts we stand before them as their authors have constructed them, and we look to them, the texts themselves, for our understanding of the world they depict."<sup>2</sup> The historical events that God makes known in Scripture come to the reader mediated through the pre-interpreted lens of the author, which followers of Jesus hold reliable and trustworthy because they are God Spirited (2 Tim. 3:16).

Lastly, it is key to understand that both the author and events represented in the biblical text have a background. The reader should understand the historical background and context that the text was written within, recognizing it has been preserved for the reader, and heavily influenced by the cultural and historical background of the author at the time of his writing. Again, Sailhamer adds, "looking at [Scripture] from the point of view of the time and place of its composition can help us understand some of the main features and purposes of the book."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the Scriptures were written from a vantage point of an author(s) at a specific point in time, influenced by a local and global cultural backdrop that the text itself speaks into.

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<sup>1</sup> John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), xx.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4.

## Exegesis & Major Themes of Genesis 17

Genesis 17 falls in the epicenter of a larger section ranging from Genesis 12:1-21:7, as illustrated below.<sup>4</sup>

- a. Introduction: Journey to Canaan and the promise of descendants (12:1-9)
- b. Abram lies about Sarai in Egypt; God protects her in foreign king's court (12:10-20)
- c. Lot settles in Sodom (and Abram settles in Hebron) (13:1-18)
- d. Abram intercedes for Lot and Sodom militarily (14:1-24)
- e. Promise of a son: from Abram himself (15:1-21)
- f. Ishmael's birth; promise to him (16:1-16)
- g. **CENTER:** Yahweh's covenant: Abram's and Sarai's names changed; circumcision instituted; promise of a son reiterated (17:1-21)
- f. Ishmael and Abraham circumcised (promise to Ishmael) (17:22-27; cf. 17:18, 20)
- e. Promise of a son: from Sarah herself (18:1-15)
- d. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in prayer (18:16-33)
- c. Lot flees Sodom, which God destroys; settles in Moab (19:1-38)
- b. Abraham lies about Sarah in Gerar; God protects her in foreign king's court (20:1-18)
- a. Conclusion: Birth of Isaac (and tension resolved) (21:1-7)

While this paper does not have the room to properly exegete Genesis 17 within this larger section, it is important to see how it is interwoven into the immediate context of chapters 15 and 16. The focus texts pertain to a covenant that God made with Abraham. In it, God promised to grow Abraham into a great nation through his seed that would live in a specific land promised to them. Contra some popular beliefs, there was just one covenant made between God and Abraham, not two or three. The promise that God would make a great nation of Abraham (Gen. 12:2) was detailed and ratified in oath-like fashion (Gen. 15) before it was actualized in Genesis 17. It was just one covenant, literarily progressed throughout the narrative. In other words, while Genesis 15 is the notarization of the covenant, Genesis 17 is the inauguration of it.

The reader understands Genesis 17 in the terms of “covenant” because of what Genesis 15 has revealed. Abraham’s vision of three distinct animals cut in two and laid to make a blood isle is very common in Ancient Near East (ANE) oath ceremonies in which the suzerain makes a promise to protect the vassal, in return, the vassal promises to keep the terms of the covenant.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David A Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament : A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2005)., T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Baker Books, 2012), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 51.

Typically, the vassal walks down the “blood isle” as a symbolic gesture of what will happen to them if they break the terms of the covenant. Any ANE reader would immediately identify Genesis 15 as a covenant. But what is completely unique to the Genesis 15 story from the surrounding culture is that God Himself, the suzerain, is the one who walks down the blood isle. This deviation serves as the theological significance in that it focuses and reminds the readers of God’s of faithfulness.

To truly appreciate the Abrahamic covenant, the reader must first understand the intentional parallels between God’s covenant with Abraham and His covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai. For example, God introduces the covenant to Abraham in Genesis 15 by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Ur of the Chaldeans.” This is identical to how God introduces his covenant to Israel on Mount Sinai, declaring, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” Both stories are analogous of how God displays His character as He divinely saves His chosen people. Moreover, God’s presence in the Mosaic Covenant was recorded as coming in the fire and darkness on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18; 20:18) and parallels Abraham’s vision of God moving amidst the flames and darkness (Gen 15:13-16). This literary strategy shows that what God sets out to accomplish, He will carry to the end.<sup>6</sup>

The sign, an action that the vassal typically fulfills in order to receive the benefits that the suzerain promised, of the covenant that Abraham and his descendants were to strictly follow is that of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14). While at first glance this seems like a cruel and random action to make people perform as a way to show allegiance, the context of chapters 15-17 reveals circumcision is be exactly the test Abraham needed to pass. While there are glimpses of Abraham’s faith and trust in God throughout his story, there are just as many narratives that

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<sup>6</sup> John Sailhamer, 152.

show Abaraham to be likened to the tempting chaos creature of Genesis 3. For example, just like the snake brought a fruit to Eve, seducing her to see that it was pleasing to her eye so she would take it, Abaraham too, in a fearful attempt to save his own life, brought his wife, Sarah, to the Egyptian king where he saw she was pleasing to his eye and he took her (Gen. 3:1-6; Gen. 12:10-20). These hyperlinks are meant to reveal aspects of Abraham character such as fear and selfishness. While there are other hyperlinks that portray Abraham's character in a positive light, Genesis 15-17 is saturated with events that reveal Abaraham to be a mixed bag, like the rest of humanity.

Within the context of God's ratified covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 and its inauguration in Genesis 17, chapter 16 reveals a critical story that speaks into the reason why circumcision was the sign of the covenant. After Abraham's vision and oath from God to multiply his seed (Gen. 15), all Abraham had to do was trust God. Instead, his wife, Sarah, took her maidservant and gave her to Abraham. Again, Abraham and his wife are put on parallel with Eve and Adam as Eve took the forbidden fruit and gave it to her husband (Gen. 3:1-6). Abraham and Sarah, like Adam and Eve, did not trust God's wisdom and way to find life, but rather, defined for themselves how to find life. As a result, Abraham ended up sexually abusing and raping Sarah's Egyptian slave, Hagar (Hebrew for refugee and is a foreshadow of how Isreal will become refugee's in Egypt) to produce an offspring and forcefully fulfill God's covenant.<sup>7</sup>

It is within this context that God makes circumcision, the very act of cutting of male gentiles, the reproductive part on a man that is needed in order to produce offspring, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It was as if God was giving Abraham another chance. This time would

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Mackie and John Collins. "Abraham, the Immigrant, and Circumcision." Podcast. Bible Project, December 14, 2020. <https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/abraham-immigrant-and-circumcision/>.

Abraham choose his own way again to achieve the covenant, or was he going to trust God's way? This test seems to be why Abraham laughed (Gen. 17:17). When God told Abraham that it was not Ishmael, his firstborn, the one whom Abraham he had spent thirteen years pouring into and preparing to carry on the seed, who would not be the promised lineage, but the babe that would come from Sarah amidst her and barren old age it brought to light all that Abraham had done apart from God's plan.. Abaraham laughing also serves as a foreshadow of His long promised seed, Isaac, whose Hebrew name meaning, "he laughed."

Circumcision was not a new concept in the ANE. There are records of Egyptian mummies, as early as the fourth millennial BC, that reveal circumcision to be a right of passage into manhood.<sup>8</sup> The theological significance is not in the similarities but the vast difference of ANE cultures and that of Genesis 17. The biblical authors preserved the sign of circumcision, not to show a right of passage into manhood, like the surrounding cultures (because God commanded eight-day old infants to be circumcised). Rather, circumcision was meant to be a test for Abraham and all his descendants to always trust God's way and not their own. It is important to note that women were still partakers in the covenant even though they could not get circumcised. This was because in a patriarchal society, the male was representative of the entire clan. A wife took on her husband's identity and just as a daughter took her father's.

Within the Genesis 17 narrative, God changes the name of the two of the main characters, Abram and Sarai. Unlike in a modern, western culture, names were not given at random in the ancient world. A names was essential to the identity and nature of the one being named. In the ANE, a name was based on the principle that an essential relationship existed between the name and the named. A name also spoke into and reflected the circumstances that the named found

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<sup>8</sup> John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. O.T. : Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 89.

themselves in. For example, Isaiah, means “Yahweh saves.” In a time when Israel was conquered and exiled by two opposing nation force for hundreds of years, it was significant that Isaiah, the one who serve as the voice of God to their people, would be the one to declare of God’s faithfulness and promised return to save His people (Isaiah 40-66).<sup>9</sup>

While Abram means “the father is exalted,” Abraham means “the father of many nations.” The name change from Abram to Abraham signified that the notarized covenant, the one-sided declaration of confidence that what was said will happen decades earlier in Genesis 15, had now become actualized through the fulfilling of the covenant as depicted in Genesis 17. It was now, after nearly thirteen years of the testing of Abram’s faith, that Abraham would receive the seed that would make him the father of many nations. This is best illustrated in the ancient world when a kingdom conquered another country. The king that was put on the new throne was given a new name to depict the significance of their new reign and rule within the nearly conquered territory.<sup>10</sup> As for Sarai, although the meaning of her name remained unchanged (*princess*), her name change from Sarai to Sarah signified the inaugurated fulfillment that she was to be the princess of many “kings” promised in Genesis 17:6,16.

Additionally, naming something or someone often made a statement about the one giving the name. It represented the complete authority one had over the object they named. For example, in Genesis 1 and 2, after mankind was charged to have dominion and rule on God’s behalf, Adam is depicted in the garden naming, giving function and purpose, to the animals. Adam was doing exactly what one would expect someone to be doing if they were just vested with the Creator God’s authority. God changing Abraham and Sarah’s name reveals to the reader

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>10</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy I-II* (Anchor Bible, 1991), 164.



that God is the one who is ultimately responsible for the fertility of Abraham and Sarah, and that He is the one who will ensure His redemption plan is accomplished.

God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 is not just an ordinary covenant. It is described as an "everlasting" covenant (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19). This prominent description requires a bit more attention. The Hebrew word for "everlasting" is *'olam*. Throughout the Old Testament this word has been correctly translated to mean "forever." Nevertheless, there are many examples in the Old Testament in which *'olam* has more to do with an open-ended perpetuity than an absolute entity. For example, in 1 Samuel 1:22, Hannah vows that Samuel will remain in the house of the Lord *'olam*. Obviously, this does not mean for eternity, or even all of his life. Rather, it connotes that the vow is open ended, perpetual. In other words, *'olam* can also indicate something permanent, not on a trial basis, in the sense that no other alternative arrangements are made to serve the intended purpose. For Abraham, God was revealing this His plan to restore all humanity was through him. That was the partnership God wholly chose.<sup>11</sup>

## **Tracing the Themes of Covenant and Circumcision Throughout Scripture**

### **Genesis**

In the biblical story, God partners with creation through covenants. Entering into a relationship with humans had been God's plan and desire from the very beginning. In the seven-day creation story of Genesis 1, God also called humans to populate the world, to "subdue" and "rule" creation (Gen. 1:28). The Abrahamic covenant seems to be progressing this very story forward. Although the word covenant is not present in the Genesis 1 story, it would be a shame

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<sup>11</sup> John H Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2001), 450.

not to see God's partnership with human image bearers as the climax (Gen. 1:26-27). Human identity is found only through His image and is indicative of a relationship with Yahweh. In Genesis 2 Yahweh specifically commissioned humanity with a very special role- to work (*'āḇad*) and keep (*šāmar*) the garden. *'Āḇad* and *šāmar* are Hebrew verbs used of Levitical priests who were tasked with preserving sacred space, the tabernacle and temple (Num. 3:7; Neh. 13:22). This parallel is intentional so that the reader may meditate on the relationship between the covenants highlighted in Scripture, superficially, the Covenant at Sinai, the Abrahamic covenant, and the first covenant with humanity in the garden.

If a reader has already read Genesis 1 to Genesis 15, Abraham's unfaithfulness as a covenant partner, depicted by his rape of Hagar in quest to produce a child, would not have been surprising. The Genesis 3 story sets the reader up to unveil the crux of the human problem. Genesis 3 is not about a perfect state of grace being lost, a historical "fall from perfection," as many assume. Rather, it is about humanity's recurring choice to break partnership with God as they prioritize self-interest and order for themselves. As noted earlier in this paper, the Genesis 16 story, and the giving of circumcision as the sign of the covenant, personifies the Genesis 3 story in so far that every self-interested decision has the chance to take away from others and prove covenant unfaithfulness. This is why it was so crucial that the biblical authors depict God as the one who walked the blood aisle, not humanity (Gen. 15)

Even the curse in Genesis 3:16 is portrayed in Abraham and Sarah's story. Yahweh said to Eve, "I will greatly multiply Your pain (עֲצָבוֹן, *'itstsābôwn*) in childbirth (הֵרֹון, *hêrôwn*), In pain (עֲצָבוֹן, *'itstsābôwn*) you will bring forth children" (Gen 3:16a). The Hebrew words here for pain is *'itstsābôwn* and *'etseb*. The majority of their uses throughout the Hebrew Bible reflect grief, sorrow, and anxiety (2 Sam. 29:2; Isa 63:10). The Hebrew word for childbirth is *hêrôwn* and

means conception. In other words, God is telling Eve that their disobedience will result in anxiety over conceiving children. This is the very pain we see Abraham and Sarah experience in Genesis 16 that results in them not trusting God's plan and pillaging their slave.

Moreover, eating from the tree of life rather than the tree of the knowledge of good and evil served as a sign to Adam and Eve just like circumcision served as a sign to Abraham. In Genesis 1-3, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented human's decision and impulse to prioritize their own interests over God's, while eating from the tree of life revealed humans decision to submit and trust Yahweh's plans. That is exactly what circumcision was to Abraham, a test to see if he would choose his own way of autonomy to fulfill the promised seed or submit to God's plan of action to redeem humanity.

Despite humans actions, God's is always the faithful covenant partner. Genesis 3 leaves the reader with a glimmer of hope as God promises to make a way. He rebukes the serpent, saying "I will put enmity, between you and the women, and between you seed (זֶרַע, *zera'*) and hers; he will crush (שָׁחַץ, *shûwph*) your head, and you will (שָׁחַץ, *shûwph*) his heel" (Gen. 3:15). *Zera'* in Hebrew is a collective term, even as it takes on singular pronouns. The serpent will be defeated by man even if it defeats the man. The seed of the women is what God's covenant with Abraham's carries forward with great anticipation. In the New Testament, authors redeploy this prominent theme as the serpent got the first Adam, but he could not get the second, Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus was the only human to thwart the power of death and sin (disorder) through His completed work on the cross (Rom. 6).

Similarly, God's covenant with Noah carries the recurring cycle of Genesis 15-17 as narrated through the lens of Genesis 1-3. Through the literary progression, God's covenant with Noah is meant to depict a renewed covenant between God and humanity. Both stories begin with

chaos waters (Gen.1:2; Gen. 7:17); have the *ruakh* (same word for spirit and wind) act upon the water (Gen. 1:2; Gen. 8:1); have dry land appear (Gen. 1:9; Gen. 8:4); have Yahweh brings forth people and animals (Gen 1:24-27; Gen. 8:17-18); receive a reiteration of blessing (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 9:1); Yahweh plants a garden, Noah plants a vineyard (Gen. 2; Gen. 9:20); Adam and Eve be naked and unaware, Noah be naked and unaware (Gen. 2:25; Gen. 9:21-23); Adam and Eve's eyes were open and they knew, Noah awoke and knew (Gen. 3:7; Gen. 9:24). These stories are rhetorically set side by side to let the reader know that Yahweh is in the business of taking the initiative to restore humanity to in their image bearing, covenant partnering identity.

## **Old Testament**

When the prophets envisioned how the transformation of a rebellious people would take place, they used the language of circumcision. Even though the physical circumcision of the flesh was a sign that set God's people apart, through their rebellion, the people chose not to live into the realized reality of God's promises. The prophets knew the only way God's people would live as faithful covenant partners was through a renewed covenant via the outpouring of Holy Spirit. After Abraham, God made two more covenants with His people. The first was with Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. God gave them instructions of how to follow Him and live in covenant faithfulness to Him. Yet, Moses longed for the day that God would come and circumcise their hearts, for that was the only way Moses believed they would ever live as faithful covenant partners (Deut 30:6). Moses prophesied this would not take place until God poured His Spirit out upon them all (Num.11:29). Although certain people were filled and appointed with God's Spirit, it was not a benchmark for every follower of God. And while every Israelite male was circumcised, it did not mean they were truly of God.

Similarly, Jeremiah pleaded with the exiled Israelite nation that they needed to circumcise their hearts in order for them to be the obedient bride (Jer. 4:4). For this to happen, God Himself would have to make a new covenant with them. One where He would put His law in their minds and write it on their newly circumcised hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). Joel attributed Jeremiah's new covenant language as the pouring out of God's Spirit (Joel 2:28-29). Isaiah also reminded the people to await the Spirit that one day would be poured out from on high (Isaiah 32:15). The Old Testament closes with great sadness as none of the covenant promise had been realized. Yet there was still hope. God made another covenant with His people through David. He assured David of a future King (the same one promised Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 17), and that a seed, offshoot, of his who would be the faithful covenant partner and redeem the people of Israel. And so, the people of God waited centuries for a much-anticipated, faithful covenant bringer and King.

## **New Testament**

The New Testament authors waste no ink in revealing Jesus of Nazareth to be this faithful covenant keeper, promised seed of the women, and Messianic King that inaugurated the new covenant through His life, death, resurrection, and consequential outpouring of His Spirit to all who believe. Matthew opens his gospel highlighting Jesus' genealogy back to the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants, introducing Jesus as "the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). In Luke's account, right before Jesus' death and outpouring of Spirit, Jesus takes the Passover meal and gives it a brand-new meaning, revealing that His blood and body, representative of His atoning sacrifice, is the new covenant that humanity longed for (Luke 22:14-20). Consequently, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Luke would immediately record

and detail in Acts the outpouring of Holy Spirit on all Jews and Gentiles who believed, thus, fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant to bless all nations through Abraham's line (Acts 2, 10).

It is evident that the New Testament authors believed the only way humanity could actually walk in the fullness of the new covenant of Christ is if we are filled, animated, and submitted, every second of the day to His indwelling Spirit. The significance of Holy Spirit being poured out to all is that Jesus was the only one to completely walk in right relationship, as a faithful covenant partner, with the God. Holy Spirit's activity in re-creating a new humanity is the realization that God had redeemed all nations through the New Covenant of Jesus. The author of Hebrews identifies Jesus as the mediator, minister, and inaugurator of the prophesied covenant of Jeremiah (Heb. 8-9). He even identifies that the outpouring of Holy Spirit signified the new covenant that all followers of Jesus now live into (Heb. 9:8). In his book, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*, Grant Macaskill summarizes the realization of the new covenant, saying

Our own flesh, then, no longer defines the limits of existence or constitutes the true outline of ourselves, for we are in a Christ and Christ is in us. Identity of "Christ in me" is the basis for his righteousness being imputed to us; it is not a transaction that occurs between external parties, [from The Father to us] but an incorporation into a person whose relationship with God is perfect. And the Spirit who inhabits us is not an energizing infusion of power; he is very specifically Christ's Spirit, who makes his goodness a reality in our limbs. Entry into the kingdom and moral identity within the kingdom are both defined and constituted by the identity of Jesus. The same gospel rules both. We cannot, then, think about the Christian moral life as something I do, assisted in some sense by the Spirit. Rather It is something that Christ-in-me does; he is as much the acting subject of my verbs of obedience as I am<sup>12</sup>

The Apostle Paul revealed how the physical circumcision of the Abrahamic covenant was only a foreshadow of the circumcision of that heart (renewed heart) that Jesus offers through

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<sup>12</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ : Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 56.

faith in Him. Paul exclaimed to the church at Colossi that through Jesus they were we all circumcised, not done of human hands, but done by God's Spirit through faith in Jesus (Col. 2:11). To a community who was trying to follow the way of Jesus but being led astray by Jews adhering to the old covenants, Paul reminded them that following the way of Jesus meant that being circumcised or not (in the flesh) accounted for nothing. The new covenant called for people whose old hearts were made new through Jesus the Messiah (Gal. 5:6). Paul could not have been anymore clear about this matter than in his letter to the churches in Rome. He reminded them that the people of God, promised through the Abrahamic covenant, are not only those of Abrahams physical descent, but are comprised of all people who have inwardly experienced the circumcision of the heart, performed only by the God's Spirit (Rom 2:29).

Just as circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, the Apostle Paul seems to infer that baptism is the sign of the new covenant of Jesus. Consequently, there seems to be a direct connection between circumcision and baptism. Again, in his letter to the church at Colossi, Paul links the two together, telling them that the circumcision that comes through faith in Jesus removed their fleshly nature (corrupted hearts), just like the spirit of baptisms identifies the believer as dead to their old self (Col. 2:12-13). Peter reminded his readers that even circumcision was just a sign of the Abrahamic covenant and not the covenant itself. Similarly, baptism is just a sign, an outward appearance, of what Christ has done in the believers heart (1 Peter 3:21). Just as circumcision displayed national identity of a people group, so too followers of Jesus who are baptized into Jesus join the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

### **Applying the Themes of Covenant and Circumcision to Life and Ministry**

When applying biblical themes to everyday life and ministry, it is imperative to live by the Scripture's wisdom in light of Jesus' finished work on the cross. In other words, in order live

as faithful covenant partners, we must filter biblical themes through Jesus and His new covenant. When living as a follower of Jesus, it is always essential to put on Christ (Col. 3). This should never be a theoretical exercise, but rather, the practical realization that He alone is the faithful covenant partner. As a result, he alone offers true life. For a follower of Jesus to experience true life, they must have True life indwell them. Only Jesus offers His righteous life and Spirit of reconciliation to humanity (1 Cor. 2:17-21). As Paul proclaimed, it was no longer he who lived, but Christ who lived in him (Gal. 2:20). This is the very identity of what it means to live in the new covenant of Christ. While the Abrahamic covenant was a remnant of God's plan, Jesus and His new covenant was the fulfillment of it all (Matt. 5:17-20).

Some practical ways to live into this newfound reality of Jesus' new covenant is keep Him constantly on your mind. Set alarms on your phone that remind you to pray, surround yourself with music allows you to praise to Him. Spend hours each day communing with Jesus. While it is possible to submit every decision and action to His will and way, it requires living in an extremely intimate relationship with the Father and listening for His Spirit to speak and move. When your children are fighting one another after you have had a very long day at work, remind yourself that you were bought at the price of the King in order to restore you back into his image bearer that can reign his authority amidst the chaos. When your boss chews you out of the third time that week, let Jesus' truth that the old you who had the right to be offended died, and Jesus' unoffendable love indwells you and wants to pour out of you, be on the forefront of your mind.

When it comes to sharing the gospel with the lost, it is vital to not shortchange the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Far too many "gospel" presentations offer people a choice to follow Jesus as their "get out of hell" free card. In reality, the new covenant of Jesus offers a much better option: the reality of true life and love found in relationship with the Creator.



Presenting the gospel, one cannot make forgiveness of sins the ultimate goal. Rather, forgiveness of sins is just the entry point into His kingdom. When people make the new covenant, bought with the blood of Jesus, solely about their sins, they typically continue to live as their old self. It is a critical not to present the gospel as a way to better oneself, but rather, as a way to die to the old self so Jesus's life can become their new life. Presenting the gospel in light of the new covenant of Jesus offers a completely and radically transformative experience and allows people to actually become the image bearing, covenant partners with God they were created to be.

Lastly, it is important that followers of Jesus do not try to earn their right to a circumcised heart. On the contrary, they must live from a circumcised heart by way of Jesus and His new covenant. What the prophets only could dream of has spiritually become a reality for followers of Jesus on this side of the cross. Because of Jesus, we have the fullness of God indwelling us. Because of the new covenant, God's kingdom can continue to advance in our houses, neighborhoods, cities, and world because we are the restored, covenant partners God has made a way for.

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