

Christmas message: Luke 2:21: The Circumcision of Christ

OUTLINE

The history of Christ's circumcision
The significance of Christ's circumcision

INTRODUCTION

This morning in preparation for Christmas I would like to impress upon us the dark side of Christmas. There is no end to the frosted idyllic scenes of a cute cherubic baby Jesus with a glowing halo. He is surrounded with raptured smiling faces, while 'no crying He makes'. Many in order to avoid the distinctly gospel and Christian aspects of Christmas have amplified the cuteness, and fixated on the birth of a baby. But today I want to cast a shadow over the birth. The shape of that shadow is in the form of a bloody blade. I want us to read together Luke 2:21, 'And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.' This verse would ordinarily stand out because this is the verse where Jesus is named. Many would rush over the part where on the eighth day he was circumcised. But this is the part I want us to consider as we remember the birth of Jesus this morning. This first shedding of the Saviour's blood and as it relates to His work in saving us from our sins.

Have you ever noticed that 8 days after Christmas Eve, on the day Jesus was circumcised we have New Year's Day? The New Year begins with what has traditionally been called the feast of the circumcision. Some Christian traditions have emphasized Mary on this occasion but today as we think about the birth of Jesus I want us to ponder the importance of Christ's circumcision. We have two aspects we want to consider. Firstly, we will look at where circumcision in the bible began and how it anticipated Christ, and then we will try and unpack some of its significance.

The history of Christ's circumcision

Circumcision was a common practice in the ancient world. But Israel was distinct in the reasons it was used. Other nations used it to signal manhood, for purification, or for prenuptial reasons. But in God's OT people it had distinct significance. God made a covenant with Abraham, it consisted of a promises of offspring, blessing and land. God made those promises when he called Abraham out of his land in Gen. 12:1-3. God then ratified that covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. And circumcision was given as the seal of God's covenant with Abraham and his offspring. Gen. 17:9-14, 'And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'"

Here are some important points to keep in mind which help us understand the significance of circumcision when it was originally given and as it applies to Christ.

The sign of circumcision defined the covenant community. All who were circumcised were in the covenant of Abraham, all who were not weren't. All physical descendants of Abraham were circumcised and added by birth to the covenant.

Circumcision represented the cutting away of the old life, and so it pointed to faith, and the need for a circumcised heart. Although one could be unregenerate and still gain a legal entitlement to the land of Israel, the sign of circumcision urged all Israelites to the faith of Abraham, Rom. 4:12.

Circumcision as it was applied to the male member pointed back to the sin we inherit from our first parents through procreation, but it also points forward to a child who would be born to Abraham's line who would undo the works of the devil.

Circumcision brought Abraham's descendants under the demands of the law. It brought with it the threat of the curse of being cut off, of death. Circumcision is a picture of judgement so that if anyone does keep the conditions of the covenant they must be punished by death. In technical terms circumcision was a self-maledictory oath.

Now the whole ceremony of circumcision, like any of the other aspects of the ceremonial law has Christ as its central meaning. In other words, the ceremony of circumcision was invented so that Christ could fulfil its significance. Let me unpack this a bit further.

Whenever you think of circumcision there are other key OT events in the life of Abraham that should be linked in your minds, all of which prepare us for Christ who would fulfil them. The first is the cutting of the covenant with Abraham in Gen. 15; then the giving of the seal of circumcision, and then finally the sacrificing of Isaac. You will remember that in Gen. 15 God told Abraham to prepare the animals for a covenant ceremony. You take the animals and cut them in half, and make a corridor between the pieces. Ordinarily those making the covenant walked through the pieces in a symbolic gesture which said that if either of them failed to keep the conditions of the covenant, may they be cut in half/cut off in death just as these animals were. But here is the surprise, God puts Abraham to sleep and says, I will walk through the pieces alone, and the judgements that your sins deserve will fall upon me. The second event we should attach to circumcision is the sacrificing of Isaac. God was testing Abraham's faith in sacrificing Isaac. In truth, Isaac as a sinner deserved to die, circumcision was a condemnation on the sinner and a promise of judgement for sin. But God stayed Abraham's hand from bringing down the knife upon his own son, and instead provided a substitute sacrifice to be killed instead of Abraham's offspring. The offspring of Abraham who were under the threat of the curse promised in circumcision were spared through God providing a substitute.

That knife that Abraham should have applied to Isaac was now being applied to Christ, the son who should have died is now born and will die. The judgement that God promised would fall upon the children of Abraham for disobedience, the promise of judgement that He said He would inflict upon Himself was applied to Christ in circumcision. The full weight of all that circumcision meant was always only ever intended for one baby, and here it is being applied.

The significance of the circumcision of Christ

Now we are better prepared to appreciate the significance of this moment. Paul tells us the significance of this moment in Gal. 4:4-5, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.' Just as Jesus, the sinless one was baptised in a baptism of repentance in identification with sinners in order to save them. In the same

way, the sinless and holy one was sealed under the law in order to fulfil its requirements and its curse on behalf of those who were born under the law.

God's law requires that you and I be perfect in order to qualify to live in God's presence enjoying His eternal bounty forever. Because He is just He cannot allow a wicked serpent to dwell in His garden, it must be put to death. If He did not kill us He would be unjust. He cannot wink at our sin and pretend we are not sinful. If He did that He would be a liar. God made man perfect and able to obey Him, and Adam could have obeyed and been confirmed in righteousness and enjoyed God's eternal presence. Because he failed now none of us can be perfect and obey all of God's laws. We are all incapable and under judgement. But Jesus was born under the law to represent us and obey the law where we could not. As a substitute, in the capacity as a federal head, only the second and last person to have ever represented His people in this way; Christ as the second and last Adam was born under the law to keep it on our behalf. Christ's positive life of obedience, His loving God and man as God's law requires is a life of obedience lived in order to provide a righteousness for the law we could not offer ourselves. Theologians refer to this as the active obedience of Christ, born under the law we would inevitably fail and bring judgement upon ourselves by, in order to fulfil it on our behalf. This is what Christ's circumcision means. He is submitting Himself to the law we cannot obey in order to do it on our behalf.

We are all born under law, each one of us is under the curse of Adam's sin. Each one of us is a sinner and doomed to sin and die. The bloody knife of circumcision is a picture of an executioner's sword, the flaming sword barring our way back to Eden. Not only does Christ keep God's laws on our behalf, He also pays for the sins we have committed. Circumcision promises death to all who break God's law, Christ submitted to circumcision in order to bring that judgement upon Himself. You remember the sacrificing of Isaac by Abraham, well, here we see God sacrifices His own Son so that the children of Abraham can be saved from the knife. God promised various blessings, but those blessings can only come through obedience to the law, Christ was born under the law to secure these blessings for us.

Col. 2:11-15, 'In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.' This is a very important portion that links for us the circumcision of Christ and the judgement of death He suffered for us. In v11 Paul tells the Colossians that they are already circumcised. This was because of the Jewish heretics that were trying to get these gentile Christians to submit themselves to various Mosaic laws including circumcision.

But Paul tells us how Gentile Christians who are uncircumcised in the flesh are circumcised. He tells us firstly, that it is not something done by the hands of men but by the Spirit, 'you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands.'

Secondly, he explains some of the significance of circumcision, 'by putting off the body of the flesh.' The flesh represents the sinful flesh, and putting it off/cutting it off is what the circumcising knife portrays. It is a putting to death of the sinner.

Thirdly, Paul tells us how the judgement of death represented in circumcision was applied to us, 'by the circumcision of Christ.' What does Paul mean here by the circumcision of Christ? You can read it either objectively or subjectively, in other words, something that happened to Jesus, or something that Jesus does to us. Given the context it is best to understand it as

saying that Jesus death on the cross is also to be viewed as Jesus circumcision. He was cut off in judgement. His body was cut off in payment for our sins.

When were we united with Christ in His death? 'having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.' When we were baptised is when we received our circumcision without hands (please notice not a circumcision not made by hands, we do not view baptism as a one for one replacement for circumcision). In other words, the day of our baptism, which synecdochally represents the day of our regeneration, the day we believed, the day we repented, the day we were added to the church, the day we received the Spirit. On account of the Spirit uniting us to Christ we were identified with Him in His death, in His being cut off, in His circumcision. The law demands your death, and this is pictured to you in the cutting off of circumcision, in Christ's death, as He stands as your substitute, all that the law requires is fulfilled. His death satisfies justice in full. Your baptism speaks about this judgement brought upon Christ as being yours by virtue of your union with Him.

The spilling of blood in circumcision is a threat of your life being taken from you in judgement. Christ took the circumcision in the flesh in order to fulfil the curse on our behalf.

We must also note the significance of the fact that Christ was circumcised on the eighth day. The 8th day is usually associated with the new creation. God made the world in 7 days. For this reason there were many Sabbaths appointed for the 7th day but there were others appointed for the 8th day. For example, the feast of tabernacles/booths. This was a feast to commemorate that time when God first lived among His people in a booth and the people of God moved around in booths. It was the first reversal of Eden where God dwelt among His people, and the first glimpse of the permanent state of affairs in the New Creation. Circumcision itself speaks of the cutting away of the old, and is a fitting picture of the new birth. Add to that the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on the 8th day, that he poured out His Spirit on the 8th day, and that the Church would meet on the 8th day. And it is 8 days after the 24th of December that the New Year begins. It is most fitting that the day of remembering Christ's circumcision is New Year's Day, for it is by His being cut off that we live, and how all things are made new. He is the firstfruits of the new creation, and His circumcision on the 8th day is pregnant with significance which reminds us of these things.

It was on this day when Jesus was circumcised that Jesus was officially named. 'And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.' Why was Jesus named Jesus and not Bob? Names in the bible have great significance. The Israelites often named their children as a statement of faith, e.g. Daniel, YHWH is my judge; John, YHWH has been gracious. God would reveal His name to His people as a way of revealing some aspect of His work or as a type of promise of a future act He would do. The naming of the Saviour of the world has this intended effect. The name Jesus is the Greek version of the name Joshua/Yehoshua. It means YHWH saves.

Think back with me then to another time when there was a blade, a son and God who saves. Think again of the sacrificing of Isaac and see in the giving and circumcision of Christ a long awaited salvation provided by God being given. We must think deeply about this name. You see the first thing this name tells us is that it is YHWH who saves. We cannot save ourselves. Many people today will say that they are glad that we have something to get us through each day, that we who need religion have it. They look down on those who are Christians as those who need a crutch. The birth and naming of Jesus

reminds us that we need a Saviour, and there is no other who can save but God in Christ. We are all sinners who have broken God's law, we cannot pay for our own sins, we do not have the strength in ourselves to pay for our own sins and make new people of ourselves. We are all broken sinners in need of the salvation that God offers us in Christ, there is no salvation without Jesus.

We must also stress that it is YHWH through this baby who is the second person of the Trinity who saves. It is not Buddha or Allah or any other deity, there is only one God and Creator and His covenant name is YHWH. He is the one who promised a child born of a woman who would crush the head of the devil, and this baby Jesus by dying for our sins overcomes Satan, sin and death. Abraham spoke to Isaac telling him that God would provide a sacrifice, and here we see God's provision a baby born to die.

So as you think of Jesus at this Christmas time this is what I want you to remember. There will be many choosing to ignore the difficult aspects of Christmas choosing instead to focus on the gift of children, or family happiness and good cheer. We know that peace, and joy can only come through a baby born to die. So when you think of Jesus at this Christmas time, remember the knife. Remember Jesus born under the law in order to satisfy the law on our behalf. Remember the cutting off of judgement, suffering the sentence of death on our behalf because we were not pure enough to pay ourselves. He was circumcised on the 8th day to indicate that by his death He will be the firstborn of a new creation, and the firstfruits. He by His death brings in a new day. Being born is not enough, He is born under a knife to die. Your sin is so serious that we must ruin our Christmas cheer and intrude into a cute picture with the reality of Christ's death pictured in the shedding of blood in his circumcision. Christmas cheer is not the result from too much eggnog, or gift euphoria, it comes at another's expense.