

Circumcision

(Genesis 17)

In Genesis 9, the sign of the covenant God made with Noah and humanity was the rainbow in the sky. Each time a human sees a rainbow they are reminded that God promised to never again destroy all of humanity by means of a global flood. The rainbow is the sign of the Noahic covenant. In Genesis 17, God established another sign of a covenant – the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. God said to Abraham, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” The sign of the Abrahamic covenant – land, a great nation, Abraham’s name made great, blessing and cursing, and the promise that in Abraham all nations will be blessed – was circumcision.

From that point on, this was not optional in Abraham, Moses, David, or even Jesus’ day. All Jewish boys 8 days old were circumcised as a sign of faith in the covenant God made with Abraham and in obedience to the law, God gave Moses (Lev 12:2). Jesus, Himself, was circumcised in the temple according to the custom (Luke 2:27). In Exodus 4, the LORD, Yahweh, confronted Moses intending to put him to death for his failure to circumcise his son. But Zipporah intervened and cut off her sons’ foreskin. Later, Joshua would lead all the males in Israel who failed to follow this commandment during the years of wandering in the wilderness to circumcise themselves (Jos 5). The physical circumcision was a sign and foreshadowing of a spiritual circumcision promised in Deuteronomy. In chapter 10, Moses commanded the Israelites to circumcise the foreskin of their heart. Obviously, the heart does not have a foreskin. This was no longer physical – this was a spiritual matter. Later, he told the people of God that Yahweh “your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (30:6). Physical circumcision was supposed to be a sign of faith like father Abraham’s faith in the promises of God. It was given before God gave Moses the law. God had always intended for physical circumcision to point to the spiritual circumcision of the heart. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of those in Israel who were uncircumcised in the heart (Jer 9:26). In Ezekiel 11 and 36 the prophet speaks of God removing man’s heart of stone and giving him a heart of flesh. Paul the apostle, in the New Testament, moves circumcision from a physical thing performed by a temple priest to that which is spiritual and done by the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes in Romans, “but a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” What is this spiritual circumcision that Paul is referring to? Biological Jews physically circumcising themselves is no longer the focus in the New Testament. Paul says a true Jew is one who has been circumcised in their heart. In this case, the heart cannot refer to flesh because this is “by the Spirit.” The spiritual circumcision Paul is describing seems to be a change the Holy Spirit makes on a person where the heart they had that did not love God now loves God. This new heart believes the gospel, has faith in the promises of God, and trusts in Christ’s work of atonement.

This spiritual circumcision is a way of describing God’s work on the person who believes unto salvation. He or she is believing with all their heart, and the Spirit of God is working in an invisible, non-physical, and non-biological way. Paul describes the Spirit’s work on the heart of man as a “circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11). This spiritual work must be what Jesus described as being born-again or born from above in John 3 and what Paul describes as regeneration in Titus 3:5.

In the same way that every lamb sacrificed in the Old Testament pointed to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, every circumcision performed on an 8-day-old infant pointed to the ultimate work of circumcision done by God’s Spirit on man’s unbelieving heart of stone. To love God, keep His commandments, and believe the gospel, man needs a new heart (Eze 36:26). Only God’s Spirit can perform this work of circumcision, and the Holy Spirit circumcises the hearts of only those who believe the gospel of Christ. This is a paradox that cannot be explained logically.

Has the Holy Spirit circumcised your heart?