

## Abraham (Part Eight)

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The last time we had Bible study, we went through chapter 16 of Genesis and this evening we are going to go through chapter 17. But I am going to begin with something that will take us a little while to get into chapter 17. It has to do with one of the overall lessons that we can get from the life of Abraham that is very important to us. That is, that a life that is centered on God gives a person an inner strength. That inner strength that I am thinking of keeps a person's life from flying apart. By way of illustration, can those of you who saw the movie "Fiddler on the Roof" remember how it began with Tevye giving a monologue and he was describing how life with all of its nuances, and sometimes very tragic circumstances, and these nuances and unexpected circumstances kept life in a precarious state. It was very similar to a fiddler playing his fiddle up on a roof.

Now what was it that Tevye said held life together? Tradition. He said that tradition held life together, gave it stability, and kept it from flying apart. This makes sense whenever you think of the Jews and their history as being a greatly persecuted people. And they looked at tradition as a people as something that gave them cohesiveness.

Tradition was something that was outside of the person, it was something bigger than himself. It was something that a vast majority of people believed in, and it tied their life together in a world that seemed very much against them and it kept them from being driven apart.

By way of contrast, I want you to think about something that I feel characterizes life today. Daniel, I think, put it very succinctly.

**Daniel 12:4** . . . the time of the end; many shall run to and fro . . .

That verse could indicate that people would be doing a great deal of traveling all over the world. As I mentioned to you before, there was a secondary

application, and that is that the “to and fro” that is being spoken of could indicate the confusion of mind, that people’s minds are casting about for direction, casting about for purpose, looking for a reason for living.

I think that even without that scripture, it is pretty evident that people are at loose ends, and they seem to be looking for an elusive something that is going to give them a sense of well being. I think that we can see that illustrated on bookshelves. There is a great deal of restlessness in American life, and I think that is manifest by the number of books there are in bookstores regarding psychology. There seems to be an almost endless amount of tomes that are written telling people, advising people, on how to pull their life together and somehow maybe “find” themselves, to be able to overcome and make sense out of the dislocations and the jangled discordant energy that is being expended all around them and maybe in their own lives as well. We see drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling, broken marriages, an almost endless pursuit of entertainment, of having the right fashion, and/or work. There are people who pursue work very zealously.

I think those things are indicators that people just cannot pull things together. People are at loose ends in their most intimate relationships. So we have groups that have sprung up such as Alcoholic’s Anonymous, Al-Anon, Gambling Anonymous, and these things, I think, have come into being at least partly in an effort as help for people to build meaningful relationships, something that will stabilize life. But they will not fully work either, because, at least for us, they do not produce the most meaningful of all relationships.

I think it is interesting to look at despite the high divorce rate in the United States, the people who have a religious bent, that are religious people, have a much lower divorce rate than the general American public. It seems to indicate then, that for a happy, enduring marriage what is needed is a loyalty to something outside the marriage, something that is big enough to produce a bond that will survive and help them overcome all the irritations that are going to arise within a marriage. The kind of things that are caused by selfishness.

I want you to think back on my original statement as I began here. One of the things that we can get from Abraham’s life is that a life that is centered on

God gives a person an inner strength that keeps life from flying apart. Something that was, in a sense, outside the normal routines of marriage, of making a living, of getting an education, something that people could look to as a means of providing a bond, a purpose, a reason for living, something bigger and greater than themselves.

Now, in light of this, consider what it says in Psalm 127:1.

**Psalm 127:1** Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

This we use, at least partially, in application to marriage. If God is involved within that marriage, and He is helping in building it, then we can live a life that is not in vain. We can have a marriage that is not in vain. We can build an institution that is not in vain. Or a government that is not in vain. A nation that is not in vain.

Without God, I take from this verse here, life tends to fly apart and produces confusion. That is, the individual's response to God in the relationship we have with Him, because of Christ's work on our behalf, acts like gravity to hold us together. Being sensitive to God and having a companionship with Him produces a mind that becomes understanding, merciful, kind, selfless, which in turn produces a fellowship of sharing within a marriage or community that stabilizes and brings peace.

In other words, in a true sense, we do not love men first and then God, but God first, and then we have the spiritual wherewithal, to love men. This is what Abraham had. If you want to prove out what I just said there, you can look in

**I John 4:19-20** We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

This is what Abraham had. See, the fellowship with God operated through or by faith. That is what Abraham had. Abraham believed God and thus it impacted every facet of his life.

**Genesis 17:1-8** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.

No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

One of the purposes of the last chapter, chapter 16, was to show the futility of human effort apart from God’s will to produce what God has promised. In this case it was the promised seed, it was Isaac. Abraham and Sarah’s experiment was to produce an heir through Hagar since Sarah could not produce one. It would seem, I think to most of us, that after one of us or Abram for that matter, had undergone such a frustrating adventure, that a truly converted mind would then be open to a correct way of doing things. And God in His wisdom would follow it up immediately, like see, I taught you this lesson now here is the right way to do it. Now most of us would probably operate that way, but God did not.

I would say from comparing these two chapters that faith through fruitfulness, that is what faith is going to produce, is only in God’s grace and not through self-will, but rather self-renunciation. We will see that a little bit later.

Remember the apostle Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” I said that normally we would think that immediately after the lesson of chapter 16 would follow the lesson of chapter 17. But it did not follow it immediately. It follows in the *book* immediately, but it did not take place until thirteen years later when Abraham was ninety-nine. It did not occur until there was no possibility that Abraham or Sarah, and we already know that Sarah was barren. We also know that thirteen years previous to this Abraham was still able to produce a child. Well, God waited until Abraham could not produce a child either, by natural means. That occurred sometime during those intervening thirteen years.

It is interesting to note that in verse 3 of chapter 17, Abram fell on his face. Now there is a posture of complete submission. It certainly indicates that Abram was in a position both mentally and physically to learn something.

God said, “I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless, and I will multiply you exceedingly.” There are seven I wills, if you want to count them. Certainly God is showing by repetition that the promise will be fulfilled because He is God Almighty. The promise to be fulfilled depends upon Him. It is a re-emphasizing of the lesson that they learned thirteen years earlier, and I think that He was making exceedingly sure that they had not forgotten it by repeating it. “*I will* make My covenant, *I will* multiply you, *I will* make you exceedingly fruitful, *I will* make nations of you, *I will* establish My covenant, *I will* give you and your descendants the land, *I will* be their God.” There are seven of them there. So He really made that very noticeable to Abraham.

Abram’s response to this, for his part, was to be single-minded toward God, or blameless. “To walk before Me” (that is God speaking), shows the path that the elect are going to have to follow in order to receive the blessing of the promise. So over and over again He emphasizes it will not be by self-will, out of Hagar, not by blood, but because God will, *I will*. Then He changes Abram’s name. That tends to indicate a new status. We might even go so far to say a new character, a new role to correspond with the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promise through the promised seed, Isaac.

Now God says, “I will make a covenant.” I think that we need to consider this. Of what value is a covenant with God to you and me? Well, a covenant is an agreement, it is a contract in which parties agree to do something, or to not do something, that will be of mutual benefit to the parties who will participate in that agreement.

Now broadly speaking, the New Covenant, let us consider it because that is the one we are involved with. The New Covenant agrees to this: That if we will give our lives to God with complete surrender to Him as shown by our repentance, our faith, and obedience in order that our Creator might create in us His holy righteous spiritual character, that is, write His laws on our hearts and minds that we might be sons, born into His Family and thus share His creation with us, then our part is to give ourselves to Him. Then, He will forgive our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ and thus remove from us the death penalty and enable us to live life in hope. Remember Hebrews 2:14, that all our lives we’ve been held in bondage for the fear of death. We can’t live life with hope if you have that hanging over your head. Does a man on death row have much hope? He does not even have hope of getting out of prison, let alone living.

So God says, if you will give your life to Me, then I will forgive your sin. In addition to that, He will give us His Spirit, which is the impregnation of eternal life, and enables us to do our part in this co-operative effort. That is, it gives us the right heart, it gives us the strength, it gives us the love to enable us to keep His commands.

In addition to that, He gives us direct access to Him through our High Priest, Jesus Christ, and thus provides a relationship with Him, a fellowship, and then also to a multitude of other promises He has made so that our lives can be more abundant right here and now. Now that is a very good deal! What this adds up to you and me, at least it adds up to me is, what the covenant does for us is that it guarantees that our lives will be significant. That is, if I can put it another way, our lives will not be lived in vain.

Go back with me to Ecclesiastes. I hope that you are beginning to tie this together with the opening thought. What is it that Abraham had? He had a life that was centered on God, and it was the life centered on God that kept

his life from flying apart, even though he was a stranger and a pilgrim, even though he did not have the seeming stability that others might have by having a settled home, and what everybody else had in society. But his life did not fly apart because he was living a life that was centered on Someone and something that was far greater than he was. Not only that, but his wife Sarah had the same thing. That does not mean that they did things perfectly, but they had that vital ingredient that is necessary for the kind of life that is not lived in vain.

**Ecclesiastes 1:2-4** “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” What profit [what significance, what reason is there for living] has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.

You see, Solomon speaks of an endless, repetitious routine of life and events on earth, and life is useless. God endowed Solomon with the most perceptive and sensitive of carnal minds. He spent a lifetime analyzing the purpose and uses of many things, especially including life itself, and he apparently never found whether human existence has any significance.

In Ecclesiastes 12, he gives his conclusion to the whole matter.

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

So he concludes, or he shows that fearing God and keeping His commandments is the best thing to do at least twice in the book, and we will read another one of them.

**Ecclesiastes 8:16** When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, . . .

In other words, he kept at it, thinking, mediating, jotting things down, analyzing them back and forth, trying to arrive at conclusions that were wise and harmonious with what he could see was going on and things that he could hope in.

**Ecclesiastes 8:17** . . . then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.

So despite all of what we would call tremendous natural ability, Solomon's life never had the significance that our life has.

Turn with me back to Luke 22. This is Jesus changing the symbols of Passover on the evening before His death.

**Luke 22:20** Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is [meaning represents] the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

So, the shedding of Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sin opens up the way for the New Covenant to be made and that is what gives significance to our lives so that we are not living life in vain. Our lives have an overriding purpose to them, to be born into the Family of God.

Now the Jew had tradition, and he thought he had the covenant with God. He had a covenant with God, what we call the Old Covenant. But it is not the same covenant that we have. A lot of their tradition was a spin-off from things they thought were part of that Old Covenant. That tradition did a great deal to hold them together and served a very fine purpose. Many of them were willing to give their lives, because they felt their lives did have significance because of the covenant they had with God. Certainly, maybe their lives had a great deal more significance to them than the lives of the Gentiles who did not have contact with God. But they were not faithful to that covenant, so at least physically, their lives ended in insignificance.



Now remember what Paul said there in Hebrews 2, “to not neglect so great a salvation.” This Passover season, the annual rehearsal of God’s plan by making us focus in and evaluate ourselves against the person in the acts, of the one who ensured our lives will not be lived in vain.

Thinking back to Genesis 17, I think it is important to notice that the covenant was initiated by God. The covenant was His idea. Religion is His idea. It is not a human idea. What this shows is God reaching out to man so that there might be a bond between Him and us, so that there might be this bond that gives us the assurance that there is purpose to life, that it is not being lived in vain.

Think about this. Genesis 17 shows God coming first to Abraham. Exodus shows God coming first to Moses. Exodus also shows God coming first to Israel. God also comes first to you and me. Think about the difference that this has in raising the possibility of you and I having a great deal more moral courage than we would otherwise have.

Now a person may say (and I am sure many have said this, and I am sure that some in this room have said it), “I want God, and I’m willing to try and draw near to Him if only He will let me.” That is not what the Bible shows. Yet, that is a very human thought. But the truth is, it works the other way around. God is the one who *initiates* contact with man. Man is so confused about what God is and what God is like that man would never find Him.

God has to be the one that initiates. If a man does the initiating, because of his instability regarding religion, because of his instability regarding values about what is right and wrong, because of all the confusion and instability in a man, then he is going to be operating from very uncertain convictions.

But on the other hand, if we really know and believe that it is God who draws near to us, that is, He wants with all His being, He desires to have a relationship with us, that He is not withholding Himself from us, that He is inviting it, He wants it, but *it is on His terms*. There has to be complete surrender or His plan will not work, His purpose will not work out. If He

does not agree to become a passenger on a ship that we are piloting, I will tell you, such pride on our part would surely lead us into all kinds of devastation, and the ship would end up on spiritual rocks.

But you see, in Him we have a God who wants the relationship, a God who is perfect. He is not confused, He knows what the right standards are, and He knows what the right way of life is, and He knows how to deal with us in this relationship. It is His will and we need to work, because that is the one that is going to secure the promise.

Abraham Lincoln had the right idea. One time during the Civil War, he was approached by a delegation of people that were pretty self-confident in their convictions of this proposal that they were going to make to Abraham Lincoln. There was an audience with them, and they presented their case, and at the conclusion of it they announced to him that they had prayed to God and that they felt that God was on their side. Well, said Mr. Lincoln, "I am not so much concerned to ask whether God is on my side. What I am concerned with is to try to be sure that I am on God's side." That is a different approach all together. It was Abraham Lincoln that was submitting to God, not the man who was inviting God to be on his side. That is an entirely different matter.

Now God then acts to propose a covenant that produces a relationship so that we can be on His side. So He desires it. Now notice one final thought before we leave the covenant.

**Genesis 17:7** And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations.

To me, this is an acknowledgment that if this is carried out, if the descendants of Abraham respond the way Abraham did, God will still be faithful and He will make the covenant. But if this is carried out the right way, then God becomes central to every issue in life. See, it spreads from Abraham to his sons and daughters, and from them to the grandchildren, and from there into the school and into the workplace as well so that the relationship with God, through the descendants of Abraham, enables God to build His way and character not only into individuals, but also into institutions as well through the family.

**Genesis 17:9-14** And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

Circumcision is then given, you might say, as a mark, it is a sign, it is a seal of those who are God’s chosen, those who have made the covenant with Him. It is the sign or the seal of an ordaining, a sanctifying, a consecrating, by God. As such, it acts to separate them from others who have not made the covenant, but it also acts to unify them as a body. This was more than just an external act. It was a mark which made a man a part of a body whose whole purpose—its dignity, its character, its trials—he then became part of, he shared in it. This gave Israel a great deal of strength to draw upon and they did it with a fierce determination that separated them from the other nations. You know how frequently that appears in the New Testament, about the circumcision. It also brought persecution upon them as well.

God intended that it be an outward and somewhat visible sign of a far more important circumcision that was taking place inside. God intended that the circumcision linked the man with Him that would be a fellowship, that would be a means of fulfilling the spiritual purpose. But what happened is that the rite of circumcision, instead of it being a source of inspiration,

eventually became nothing more than a tradition whose real meaning evaporated. The Israelite became so self-assured over the fact of his circumcision that it helped paralyze their spiritual growth.

**Matthew 3:8-9** Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”

Now they did physically what God commanded Abraham to do, and they circumcised their children on the eighth day. But through the centuries, the rite of circumcision became looked upon, at least in a general way by the general population, as the means of salvation. Witness what John the Baptist said, that they believed that they were Abraham’s children and that what made them Abraham’s children was physical descent coupled with the circumcision. Jesus ran into the same difficulties and they are recorded in John 8. So instead of circumcision serving as a reinforcement of the spiritual truth it was intended to convey, it became to them a sign or a means of their salvation. We have to be careful that we do not fall into the same trap.

Now we are already in the season where we are to get the leaven out of our house. It is a physical rite that has underlining spiritual meaning to it. What happened to the Jews regarding circumcision was that they could go through the rite of circumcision and yet still be filled with hatred, with deceit, with covetousness, with idolatry. Jesus, in Matthew 23, called the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs who are full of dead men’s bones.” He meant on the outside they looked good because there was nobody, at least in the Jewish public, that was more zealous in keeping the rites, the rituals, the ceremonies of Judaism. So externally, at least judging by outward form, they looked as though they were righteous, but on the inside, they were spiritually corrupt.

We can fall into the same kind of a trap and allow the external of doing things in the outward form be a hindrance to us. Those things do have a way of unifying us into a body, it is something that we share, a common practice. We travel to the Feast of Tabernacles and those things tend to bind us together. They give to the church a cooperative power because of the unity

that is there. They also give to the individual a sense of belonging, that is good as well. But they cannot be allowed to become an end in themselves. They are merely a means in teaching a very valuable spiritual lesson.

**Galatians 5:6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

This is a series of phrases, an expression that the apostle Paul uses at least two other times in other books. There is one in I Corinthians which we will look at and there is another one here in the book of Galatians, and there may be others as well. What he is saying is that what is important is, that is, of and by itself, circumcision or uncircumcision are not all that important, but what is important is faith working or expressing itself through love.

Today, circumcision is not something that is required as a ritual, a ceremony, a rite, but baptism is. Baptism is like an initiation into the new Israel, the Israel of God, which should help to create in the conviction that we are the chosen and that we are sealed. We are the ones to whom God has chosen to reveal His purpose. If we somehow allow baptism to become perfunctory, which is what many of the churches have done, baptizing a baby when it cannot think, it cannot really act on anything, has no experience, has no background to produce repentance or anything of that nature, baptism becomes perfunctory. Baptism can become perfunctory even when one is an adult and goes through it as well just as a means to gaining entrance into a certain congregation, the person has to be baptized.

On the other hand, we could very easily allow baptism to become like the Jews began to think of circumcision, as an automatic means of salvation. In either case, baptism is degraded, rather than being a gateway into a fellowship with God and His saints.

Now, what Paul is saying here in Galatians 5:6, is that it is faith expressing itself in love rather than the physical circumcision that determine who the true sons of Abraham are. Living by faith is the true seal of righteousness. In this context faith is working through or expressing itself in love.

**Galatians 6:15** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

Again, what he means is: But what is important, is a new creation. The context has changed where Paul uses that expression, but again he is working to show the people of God, the Israel of God, the true sons of Abraham, those who have been circumcised in the heart, he is showing them what is of primary importance, and that is being in front of Jesus and being a part of the new creation that God is making.

Let us go to another one in I Corinthians 7 where it appears in a different context.

**I Corinthians 7:18-19** Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.

Here the context shows faith expressing itself with keeping the commandments of God. You see, a rite, a ritual, a ceremony. In this case, circumcision cannot guarantee a man will love his neighbor as himself. What is needed is God working in the person to produce a new creation in, that is part of, Christ Jesus, the second Adam.

Let us look at some other verses in the New Testament that circumcision appears in.

**Romans 2:26-29** Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Circumcision was to be an outward sign of obedience to the law, if this person had made the covenant with God, and if they were submissive to its

terms. I think I can safely say that obedience certainly plays a part in the circumcision made without hands.

If we take the lesson ourselves, just take it out of its context in that day and apply the lesson to ourselves. I think what Paul is saying here is that the person who willy-nilly, carelessly, maybe even willfully at times breaks God's law, that he is no better off, though he has been circumcised, though he has entered into the covenant, though he has been baptized, though he is going through the rites, he is no better off than the person who is outside of Christianity. Circumcision, both physical and spiritual, is a value only to the person who tries to live within the laws demands.

So, who is a true Christian? Paul says here that those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law, stand in a position to judge, maybe even to condemn, those who know the truth but break God's law. Now which is more important? This just reinforces what he said back there in I Corinthians 7: 18-19.

The true Israelite, the real Christian, is one whose obedience is from the inside out, there has been a change of heart. The person has the right spirit, the right attitude toward God. His obedience is an act of service, an act of submission to God and to man, and is not merely a means of earning righteous points. It is not merely the means of meeting a legal requirement. There is more involved in it than that.

A true Israelite's obedience is not a point of arrogance, "look how good I am." His obedience is not a matter of *appearing* good, but it is a matter of truly *being* good because of his relationship with God. It is not his righteousness, but God's righteousness coming out in the man.

**Romans 4:7-12** "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin." Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

Paul's point here is to put circumcision into its proper place in our mind. And that is, that circumcision derives its true significance through what preceded it. Well, what preceded the circumcision? It was faith. Abraham was accounted righteous before the circumcision. It was not the circumcision that made him righteous. It was him believing God and God imputing righteousness to him because of his faith, because of belief.

Now that puts circumcision in its proper place. It is secondary to what is exceedingly more important, and that is faith. It was the faith that led to the circumcision, not the circumcision that led to the faith. It was the faith that caused God to respond and enter into the covenant with Abraham, the seal or the sign of which was circumcision. So circumcision was what came afterward.

What the Jews did is that they confused the sign with the reality, and the natural result of that was circumcision usurped faith in importance. That is what they relied on. It was not living by faith, it was not obedience by faith, it was not having the love of God shed abroad in their hearts through the Holy Spirit which came as a result of faith, a faith that expressed itself in obedience to God and the keeping of the commands. God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him.

The primary issue here is that which preceded everything else was the faith. The faith motivated the obedience, and then the covenant was entered into.

**Philippians 3:1-3** Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.



Again, Paul is putting circumcision in a different letter to a different group of people and again he is putting it in its proper place. Here he is using circumcision as a kind of a catchall for a term of all outward forms. Outward forms cannot be trusted as evidence or proof that a person's inward life is right. Let me add something here. He is not saying that a person should be circumcised. I hope you are not getting that conclusion from this. You might recall that in Acts 15, a council was held in which the early church said that a person did not have to be circumcised. But if you read in Acts 16, Paul circumcised Timothy.

He is not saying that it is evil. He is not saying that it should not be done. He is trying to make sure that we understand where the emphasis ought to be. He is not saying that a person should not be circumcised anymore than he is saying that a person should not be baptized. What he is saying is that we should go on from these points in working on and developing our relationship with God, growing in the grace and knowledge, and doing acts of faith.

**Colossians 2:8-13** Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

Our spiritual circumcision is symbolized by baptism as the context shows there. But it is a circumcision of the heart, of the mind, of the attitude towards God that gives us the right spirit, the right approach to things. Evidence that we have been humbled, that we have repented, we have

submitted to God, we have entered into the agreement, into the covenant with God through baptism, and we have received God's Spirit. We have done the rite, the ceremony, the ritual. Do we stop there now that the agreement has been made with God? We have surrendered and given ourselves to God, do we stop there? Or do we work to develop the relationship.

Well much of the rest of the book of Colossians is on that last question.

**Colossians 3:1-2** If then you were raised with Christ, . . .

If you have been raised up, resurrected out of the waters of baptism, which symbolizes the circumcision of the flesh, that is, the inward man, the circumcision of the heart. "If then you were raised with Christ," notice the orientation,

**Colossians 3:1-2** . . . seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

What happened to the Jews is that circumcision led to them an earthly orientation. Were they not looking for the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth? Were they not looking for a Messiah that was going to boot the Romans out and establish Israel, one of the great nations of the earth? Were they looking for entrance into a kingdom through repentance, through faith, through complete and total surrender of one's life to God as God might work within that person, developing His love, His peace and writing His laws on their hearts and minds? They were not looking for that. They had a purely physical orientation to it.

**Colossians 3:3-5** For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth:

Whenever a person is circumcised, that which is cut from the body dies. So here in the first five verses, Paul said that if you have been circumcised in

heart, you are going to change your focus in life. Second, you are going to mortify, that is put to death, it may as well say cut off. Now what do you cut off? The sin!

**Colossians 3:5-6** . . . fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, . . .

See, this is the responsibility of those who make the covenant. It is not baptism, baptism is a means to an end. The end is having God's laws in our hearts and minds and being born into the Family of God. The rite is merely the means to the end. Should we do it? Yes we should. Should we get the leaven out? Yes we should. Should we fast on the day of Atonement? Yes we should. Should we travel to the Feast of Tabernacles? Yes we should. God is the author of ceremony, God is the author of rituals, but they are not an end in themselves and we cannot trust our salvation because we are merely going through the ritual.

**Colossians 3:7** : . . . in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

Jesus showed the circumcised Pharisees went through all the rites. But they were doing things that were the breaking of God's law, things that were far more important.

**Colossians 3:8** But now you yourselves are to put off . . .

The metaphor Paul is drawing on here has to do with taking off clothing. But it is not hard at all to understand that it can be used in the sense of cutting away the filthiness of the flesh, that is, a continuing circumcision. Not one that is completed at repentance and baptism, but a circumcision that continues all through a person's life. Now that person is growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, that person is truly circumcised.

**Colossians 3:8-11** But now you yourselves are to put of all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old

man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Circumcision signifies the certain suffering in the flesh. It is not a pleasant thing for a little boy to go through, he does not remember it because it happens on his eighth day, but they usually cry and they cry hard because they do not like the indignity that they are put through, and if they could think, they would think this is the most humbling thing that has ever happened to me during my eight days of life. And it should be spiritually as well.

Undergoing the circumcision of the flesh is not only a humbling thing but also a painful thing as well. Part of the lesson is that it testifies to you and me that in getting rid of these sins that God is talking about here in Colossians 3, that our hope is not in the flesh, in all this energy and everything that it produces, just like Abraham went through there in Genesis 16. But our faith is in what it says here in Genesis 17. Our faith is in God Almighty, that He will fulfill His purpose in you and me.

**Philippians 3:8-10** Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him [it means experiential through living, through copying, through following the example, through living by faith] and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

For most of us, that suffering comes in resisting the pulls of the flesh that God wants circumcised from us. The flesh puts a great deal of pressure on us to conform to its demands, to conform to the world, to conform to Satan, because the flesh has gotten its desires from living in this world and being influenced by Satan. After we are converted, after we go through baptism,

even after we have repented the flesh continues to put pressure on you and me and tries to exert its influence, but it has to be cut away.

The only one who can cut it away is God Almighty in doing a circumcision made without hands. But our response is to be the same as Abraham's, to walk before Him and be blameless, to be single-minded in our approach to life in yielding to Him, cooperating with Him as much as lies within us, in being submissive to Him. But He will take care of the circumcision because of the faith, not because of a mere rite that we have gone through. Paul said that he did this if by any means that he might obtain the resurrection from the dead.

Now let us go back to Genesis 17. After that instruction in verse 15 when God changed Sarai's name, and I am sure this was done in order to conform to the change of the name of Abram. That is, to give her a name that is equivalent to his, because she too was a part of this agreement, she too was going to become a part of the fulfillment of the promise of God, and she too was entering into a new phase, a new position in the relationship. God then said He was going to bless her and give her a son, give him a son by her and she would be the mother of nations even as Abraham would be the father of nations. And then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and Sarah also laughed later on. And Isaac means laughing.

Now there must have been a difference between the laugh of Abraham and the laugh of Sarah. Sarah was chastised by God for laughing, apparently in the wrong attitude. Abraham, apparently his laugh was one that could be connected to belief rather than disbelief, an exclamation of surprise, or maybe eager anticipation.

But he still, thinking of Ishmael, exclaims, "Oh, that Ishmael may live before You!" Then God reaffirms once again that Ishmael was not the promised seed, but rather the promise was going to be fulfilled by someone that God alone was able to provide. "I will, I am God Almighty." If God makes a promise, men cannot fill it, only God can. We have a part in yielding to God, to maintain the relationship with Him, but He only can fulfill the promise and we have to live by faith until He does. God does give a blessing to

Ishmael and assures Abraham that Ishmael will be fruitful and that twelve nations are going to come from him, or twelve princes and that he was going to become a great nation, but the covenant would be established with Isaac.

**Genesis 17:23-24** Abraham took Ishmael and all of his servants and everyone in his house were circumcised. Abraham was ninety-nine when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin and Ishmael his son was thirteen when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

To this day, the Ishmaelites, the Arabs, are circumcised at thirteen, as for the sons of Abraham, the sons of Isaac, they are circumcised on the eighth day. What do you think the eighth day signifies? Well I will tell you what my idea is. I believe that it is at least a veiled reference to the fact that God took seven days to create or refashion the earth and that it indicates that which is physical. We might also say, that which is carnal. It is the day of the first Adam, the day of man apart from God. It is the period of this world.

The eighth day signifies a new beginning, it signifies a new creation, of being created in Christ Jesus, it signifies the second Adam. So I think that there is a veiled spiritual overtone that is indicating that the way that we become a new person, created in Christ Jesus, a new creation is to under go a *spiritual* circumcision, the circumcision of the heart.

So when your little boys are circumcised on that eighth day it carries with it a lesson that signifies something of far greater importance. A spiritual circumcision leading to birth. First leading to acceptance into, entrance into by being born into the Family of God and fellowship with the saints.