

# Why We Must Put Out Leaven

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Years ago, I had a favorite question to ask ministers about the Days of Unleavened Bread. "Why must we go through the physical act of putting leaven out of our homes before the Days of Unleavened Bread, but we are not required to be physically circumcised?" I never received an answer.

There are many parallels between circumcision and deleavening our homes. Both of these physical acts demonstrate a spiritual principle. Circumcision symbolizes an attitude of heart and mind (Romans 2:26-29), and deleavening our homes symbolizes putting sin out of our lives (I Corinthians 5:6-7). The New Testament, however, makes it clear that Christians do not have to be circumcised physically (Galatians 5:6). Why, then, do we have to put leaven out of our homes during the Days of Unleavened Bread?

Like me, others may have had the same question and never received an answer. Because they consider these "works" to be done away with the Old Covenant, some churches that observe the holy days do not require members to deleaven their homes. When we search the Scriptures about this matter, we will see why ridding our homes of leaven is so important but circumcision is not.

## First-Century Controversy

Since God instituted circumcision as the sign of the covenant He made with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-11), it predates the Old Covenant by several hundred years. When God called Israel out of Egypt and gave them His laws, He included the command to circumcise male babies (Leviticus 12:3). Circumcision identified the Israelites as physical descendants of Abraham, gave them a sense of national identity and set them apart from other nations of the world.

The nation of Israel was a type of God's church. Many of the rituals that God commanded Israel to do symbolize spiritual principles. For example, the command to kill the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:3-6) typifies the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Indeed, God established the entire sacrificial system to keep the Israelites mindful of their need for a Savior (Hebrews 9:11-14).

When Christ came, instituting the New Covenant, the way opened for Gentiles to enter the church through repentance and baptism just like the Jews (Acts 10:44-48; 11:1-18). Though they were not physical descendants of Abraham, converted Gentiles became Abraham's spiritual progeny through their faith in the sacrifice of Christ and receipt of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:26-29).

The Gentiles' conversion resulted in a serious controversy in the church over whether they should be required to be circumcised. This major issue resulted in the convening of the first ministerial conference in the history of God's church (Acts 15). At this conference, the ministry was led to decide that the Gentiles do not need to be circumcised. Peter concludes,

So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them [Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us [Jews], and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. (Acts 15:8-9)

God revealed to the apostles that, under the New Covenant, He makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Regardless of race or ethnic origin, He extends the promises of salvation to any and all whom He chooses to call. Under the New Covenant, physical descent from Abraham no longer matters because God is concerned only over the person's repentance and faith in Christ. Those who receive the Holy Spirit after repentance and baptism become "the seed of Abraham." Additionally, because the purpose and meaning of physical circumcision have been superseded by the New Covenant, there is no need to inflict pain and possible psychological distress on an adult male through this operation.

Peter emphasizes that God looked upon the hearts of the Gentiles and saw their repentance. Although they were not circumcised, God forgave their sins because of their repentance and faith in Christ and granted them the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were, therefore, justified by faith and spiritually circumcised, that is, in heart and mind (Romans 2:28-29). During the Jerusalem conference, God revealed to the apostles that *justification fulfilled the spiritual symbolism of circumcision*.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes this very clear:

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. (Colossians 2:11-13)

Paul shows that circumcision typifies putting off the old man of sin that is buried in a watery grave at baptism. After being raised from the water in newness of life (Romans 6:4), the repentant sinner stands before God perfect, holy and sinless. The process of spiritual circumcision is complete, and the symbol of physical circumcision is fulfilled.

### **Purging the Old Leaven**

What then are the differences between the symbolism of circumcision and that of putting leaven out of our homes? When God called Israel out of Egypt, He commanded them to observe the seven Days of Unleavened Bread:

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. (Exodus 12:15)

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that God expects Christians to keep this festival. Paul writes, "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5:8).

Throughout the New Testament, God uses leaven as a symbol of sin. Jesus warns, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). In discussing the danger of sin spreading, Paul uses the phrase "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" on two separate occasions (I Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9).

Paul plainly instructs that the purpose of keeping the Days of Unleavened Bread is to remind us of our need to remove sin from our lives.

Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (I Corinthians 5:7-8)

Because of the serious sins that a Corinthian member had committed, and the congregation's general acceptance of this situation, Paul advises them to use the Days of Unleavened Bread to "purge out the old leaven." They should examine their attitudes and put these sins out of their lives and out of the congregation. He reminds them that the Passover is a memorial of the death of Christ, who died for us that we may receive forgiveness of sins. They "truly are unleavened," he says, in the sense that they had repented and been justified through faith in the sacrifice of Christ. However, since they had allowed leaven to return into their lives, they needed to get rid of it.

This is the heart of why we are still required to put leaven out of our homes. Leaven represents sin, and deleavening our homes symbolizes purging sin from our lives. However, *cleansing our lives of sin is a lifetime process that will not be completely fulfilled until we are resurrected and transformed into spirit.* As long as we are still flesh and blood, we will never be absolutely perfect—we will never free ourselves completely and totally of sin. This constant struggle to overcome human nature and put on God's nature is called sanctification.

Nevertheless, we must continually strive to conform to the image of Jesus Christ, that is, to be a truly perfect human being. Paul writes:

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

God wants us to observe the Days of Unleavened Bread year after year to remind us that we are not perfect and that our lives are a constant struggle against sin. When we deleaven our homes, we find that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot find every tiny crumb that may be imbedded in carpet or hidden behind an appliance. This illustrates how deceitful sin is and teaches us that we must constantly examine ourselves to purge it out of our lives. Removing sin is hard work! The Days of Unleavened Bread remind us annually of this constant warfare that all Christians must wage throughout their lives.

Why then must we remove leaven from our homes but need not be circumcised? The answer is that physical circumcision no longer has a purpose under the New Covenant. Its symbolism is fulfilled in the process of repentance, baptism and receipt of the Holy Spirit. However, the object lesson of deleavening our homes still has great meaning and purpose for us. The symbolism of putting sin out of our lives will not be completely fulfilled until we are changed and inherit the Kingdom of God and become like Him who cannot sin (I John 3:9).