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Circumcision

We're going to continue in our study of the book of Ephesians this morning. We've made it to Ephesians 2:11 where Paul begins describing, once again, more of the reality of the finished work of the cross. This entire section, starting in verse 11 and going through verse 22, is nothing more than one more powerful description of what he had come to know as a present, spiritual reality of the New Covenant.

This section is in no way just a description of proper Christian doctrine. This was one of Paul's many attempts to describe in words a concrete spiritual reality that he had come to know and experience.

Today we're just going to look at his introductory sentence for this section, having to do with circumcision and uncircumcision. Lets read the verse.

Eph 2:11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—

What Paul is going to do in this section is describe how both Jew and Gentile have been made One New Man in Christ. He's going to go on to describe how God destroyed them both through the death of Christ, and raised Christ up as the resurrection and life of all who live – thus making peace. There is no longer enmity because the two have become one spirit. We'll get more into that in the weeks to come.

But he begins this section by reminding the Ephesian people of what was true of them prior to finding death, burial, and resurrection in the person of Christ. Prior to the cross the Gentiles were known by the Jews, and called by God, the uncircumcised. And this uncircumcision, Paul makes very clear here, although significant of something spiritual to come, was only of the flesh made by human hands.

I'd like to spend this week looking at the reality of circumcision in the Scriptures – why it was the sign of the covenant, what it pointed to, why God established it. And this certainly is NOT going to be just a history lesson. Everything we are going to talk about with reference to circumcision, even though it was a requirement for Old Covenant Israel according to the flesh, is even more significant and essential to understand for us who have come to the fulfillment and spiritual substance of all that circumcision testified to.

In other words, they were only commanded to do it in the flesh because of what it spoke of in the spirit, and what we have actually come to in Christ. Its not just something that God liked for a while, but now He's done with it. It's something God has always seen with respect to salvation. And like all things of the old and new

covenants, first he testified of it in the natural, in the flesh, in the old...and then He fulfilled it and established it as spiritual reality for us in Christ.

There is nothing that God commanded or instituted in the old covenant that he just decided to discontinue. He never got tired of something or changed his mind. Everything commanded and instituted was put away in the flesh only when it was fulfilled and made real in spirit. And it seems that Christians are somewhat aware of that when it comes to things like animal sacrifices and wave offerings. But I believe we remain mostly unaware of how that is also true about things like priests, worship, serving God, offerings, righteousness, works, places of worship, days of the week or year, etc. We may talk more about some of those things later.

Today I want to look specifically at circumcision. What it was in the old, and more importantly, what it is now in the new. To begin with, most of us know that circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God entered into with Abraham.

Gen 17:10 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; 11 and 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 child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 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. 14 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."

What is a covenant? We've discussed in the past that a covenant is an understanding or agreement by which two parties come into some kind of a relationship. In order for two parties to walk as one, there must be a common understanding, or a common agreement by which they relate to one another. That's what a covenant is. It is the "how" of a relationship. How do you relate to so-and-so? According to this understanding, according to this agreement, this covenant.

The covenant that God made with Abraham had a sign that signified the nature of their relationship. And that sign was circumcision – the removal of flesh. Why did God choose circumcision as the sign of His relationship with Abraham? Because God was demonstrating in the flesh, in the natural, what would come to be the understanding, the agreement, the nature of **our** relationship with God in spirit. With Abraham, God chose the removal of natural flesh as the sign of His covenant, because in Christ the removal of the entire body of flesh would be the doorway to the New Covenant. In other words, the removal of the foreskin of the flesh pointed to the removal of the entire body of flesh by the cross. In the old we have a piece of the old man removed, in the new we have the entire old man removed.

Can you see? Let me say it another way. What was the "how" of God's relationship with Abraham? How did God have a relationship with him? God related to Abraham on the basis of faith, and according to the reality that flesh profited nothing and so was put away. Flesh was removed, blood was shed, and God worked with and for Abraham according to faith. Do you see that this is no different than the covenant that we have entered into today? Ours is not a different covenant, ours is simply the fulfillment and reality of this one. That is why God calls it "the everlasting covenant"

in the passage in Genesis that we just read. Why is it everlasting? Because God would always relate to man only by faith and according to the removal of flesh, the circumcision of the entire old man.

One testified of the other, but they both declare the same thing. One pointed to the other, but the other isn't contrary to the first, it is the fulfillment of it. What God established with Abraham was eternal, not because men would always be required to be circumcised in the flesh in order to have relationship with God, but because all humanity would be required to face the circumcision of the cross, the crucifixion of all flesh, in order to have relationship with God in spirit and truth. And that is exactly what we come to in Christ, the circumcision of the old man, the nature of flesh, from the soul. The cutting down and burial of the Adamic man.

Colossians 2:11 "and **in Him** you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in **the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ**"

So in Abraham's day, what God established was really a division. A division of all humanity. There were those who by faith were able to relate to God according to the covenant of circumcision. And then there were those who were outside of that covenant, outside of that relationship, divided from that Seed. You could say, in fact, that those outside of the relatedness that came by circumcision, were strangers from the covenant, and entirely without God. God did not have a covenant A and a covenant B. He had one relationship with man. It was according to the promise of the then coming Seed, by faith, and according to circumcision. And that is why the very next verse in Ephesians describes the gentile nations as follows.

Eph 2:12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Now this is very important. I know that it is very commonplace in the church to think that all people in the world have some sort of relationship with God, but Christians have a better one, or a forgiven one. But that's not really how it works. There is only one true relationship with God, it is the relationship that Christ has with His Father, and it is in spirit and truth. And you and I are either a part of His relationship with His Father by being born of His Spirit and abiding in Him, or we are part of the sea of adamic humanity that "has no hope, and is without God in the world". That may be quite politically incorrect, but it is nevertheless true.

How do I know that it is true. I know it is true because Christ didn't give you a relationship with God, Christ IS your relationship with God. If you are outside of Christ, then you are outside of relationship with God. God is still there seeking to draw you into relationship through Christ. He is still causing rain to fall and sun to shine on the righteous and unrighteous. But an unbeliever can't truly be said to have relationship with Him. Well, I suppose you could say that unbelievers have a relationship with God, as long as you understand that the nature of that relationship is what the Bible calls judgment and death. Separated from life. That is why Jesus and the apostles make statements about the world being without hope and without God.

Jesus says

Joh 3:18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John the Baptist says:

Joh 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Do you realize that what God has done for you by the cross is bring you into Christ's death so that you could live by His life and thereby inherit Christ's eternal union and relationship with His Father? I'm not saying that you become Jesus. I'm saying that Christ lives in you, and He is made unto you, appointed unto you a covenant, a relationship with God. And this is nothing other than what the prophets prophesied.

Isa 42:6 "I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles,

Isa 49:8 Thus says the LORD: "In an acceptable time I have heard You, And in the day of salvation I have helped You; I will preserve You and give You As a covenant to the people, To restore the earth, To cause them to inherit the desolate heritages;

Christ is your relationship, your covenant, with God. Once, in the days of the Old Covenant, the relationship with God was according to the sign of circumcision – where man would lose flesh and enter into covenant by blood, through faith, and become the expression in the earth of Him who was to come by way of a priesthood, a kingdom, a Law, various feasts, sacrifices, etc. What was all of that all about? That was about a covenant. That was about a people who did all of that as a testimony of their relationship with God. Now, in the New Covenant, it is no longer the natural testimony of such a relationship, but the reality of spiritual union with Christ. Now it is not a little blood from a portion of the natural man that is the sign of covenant. Now the sign of covenant is the death and burial of Jesus Christ in whom we were crucified, in whom we were baptized into death, in whom the entire body of flesh was put off.

I'm saying this a handful of different ways hoping that one of them will strike you with some force. I want it to strike you, first of all, that Old Covenant circumcision was the God-given picture of relatedness to God. And I want it to strike you even harder that what you have come to is not the end of circumcision, but the reality of it. The fulfillment of it. The removal of the body of flesh.

It is essential that we all see that so clearly because herein is the relationship with God that we have come to through the gospel. The gospel isn't the forgiveness of the old. Sure there is forgiveness, but the forgiveness is through the death of the old. Forgiven in that it was removed. The removal of one kind, one nature, one seed – the body of flesh, so that we could partake of Another.

And we have been mentioning in our study of Ephesians, particularly when we've looked at Paul's description of the natural man in the beginning of chapter 2, that until we see the reality of circumcision, then we're going to try to improve for God what He has already condemned and removed.

That is why God makes such a big deal of circumcision in the Old Testament. He wasn't just hung up on obedience to a command. He demanded that those who were His people understood that they were His people through the removal of flesh. God says to Abraham "here is the sign of our relationship, here is the sign of our ability to walk together, here is the sign of the understanding that has brought us into relationship – cut off the flesh of all of your sons."

I can see Abraham asking the question..."why God?". And God answering..."because Abraham, in your flesh dwells no good thing. Because the flesh profits nothing. Because in my sight no flesh will glory. Because you will gain nothing in and through the flesh. If you gain, it will be the gain of my Son, the promised Seed, and it will be by faith. Apart from me, you can do nothing. Relatedness to me is actually going to be the exchange of what you call your life, for what I know to be life. And now let me show you something of that...go, and leave your own country, your kindred, and your father's house and go unto a place that I will show you."

And so it began with Abraham. And the story of his life is the story of several altars that he built unto the Lord, each one signifying something of Himself that is left behind in exchange for God's inheritance. And if you were to ask Abraham later in his life why he was circumcised, he might of answered something like this: "Because its not I, but Christ. Because I tried it in the flesh and kept getting Ishmaels. Because I tried to bring things with me, and they only got in the way. Because everything I have, everything I have inherited, and everything I have been promised, is through the increase of the Seed".

Alright, so lets bring all of this back into our verses for today. Paul says that the Ephesians were "once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision, made in flesh by human hands"...and then he goes on to describe how they were previously alienated from God and from the covenants of promise, and without God in the world.

He explains all of this because he is about to describe the wonderful reality of what He calls the "one new man". And we will spend a good amount of time on those verses. But for this morning I just want us to notice how Paul talks about the distinction of circumcision and uncircumcision. He could not possibly go out of his way any more to show that the fleshly distinctions simply do not exist in Christ. Look at how many ways he tries to show us that the fleshly type and shadow has come to an end in Christ.

He says that they were "once Gentiles", implying that such a distinction is no longer relevant. He adds "in the flesh", to signify that it was never a spiritual distinction. He says they were "called uncircumcision", implying that in the typology it really just a name, and not a spiritual condition. He goes on and insists that even the so-called "circumcision" camp was only made in the flesh by human hands. Can you see what he's obviously trying to do here? He is trying to remove from their heart any thought that anything of the flesh, anything of the testimony in the natural, has any spiritual relevance in Christ.

Though it once testified to, spoke of, demonstrated something of spiritual reality, now that the spiritual reality is here, the natural types and shadows have been fulfilled. They are not destroyed, but fulfilled. And in being fulfilled, they are over

and done with as natural shadows, and have come to be real and eternal as spiritual substance.

And so he insists that both Jew and Gentile completely let go of what was only a powerless, substance-less shadow, of what has now come to be real. Again, not because God changed his mind, but because what was always on God's mind when he decided to give a natural testimony, had come.

This is what Paul is referring to in Colossians chapter 2.

Col 2:16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

And Galatians chapter 4

Gal 4:9 But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years. 11 I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

Here's what Paul is saying. There once was a division in the flesh between circumcised and uncircumcised that pointed to the division of the cross. God set apart a people for Himself that were the corporate expression of His coming Son. Those people were divided, set apart, called out from the nations through the covenant of circumcision. Now, the true circumcision has come – the removal of the body of flesh through the circumcision of Christ. Therefore these shadows have dissolved in the appearing of the person.

And yet, Paul's constant struggle and heart-ache for the church of his day was watching people continue on in what God had put away. They continued trying to serve God and know God and please God through types and shadows of the coming Son, rather than abiding in and making manifest the actual Son Himself. This is Paul's perpetual struggle with the church of his day. And I know for a fact that it is the perpetual struggle of the church of today as well.

What is? We, like them (though perhaps in slightly different ways) continue trying to serve God, know God, and please God through types and shadows in the flesh of what God has already established in Christ.

Give me some examples? Well, I usually try to let the Spirit of God deal with people on specific examples, but since there isn't a whole lot of people left to offend, I'll be more frank. I'll give a few examples, but I won't say much about them.

1. We think places, buildings, or people are anointed. That is an old covenant reality that pointed to Christ. Everything anointed in the Old Covenant was either a dwelling place, instrument, or person that was a God ordained testimony of His Son. There is not a single person or place on earth that is anointed. There is a Son who is anointed and who indwells people. People occupy places, not God.
2. We think that things done in the flesh are pleasing to God. Offering sacrifices...not of animals, but of our time, money, food, preferences. We

think God is pleased with our attempts to obey the Mosaic Law, keep fasts and feasts and holy days, walking according to outward commands...these were all ordinances of the Old Covenant. All of them come to spiritual reality when Christ, who is our life, is formed in us. He is the very Person who was described by the Law now working in us as we walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. He is what is offered up to the Father. He is the day of rest, the Jubilee, the feast days of God. We don't make sacrifices for God, we ARE the living sacrifice so that Christ can live in us. Christ is all of these things, now dwelling in the midst of His people. These aren't things that we learn how to do. They are things that He is, and things that work in us as His increase becomes our decrease.

3. We still think that God sees us according to the flesh. For instance, we think that God is concerned about white rights, black rights, women's rights. We think that God wants our churches to have an equal representation of different nationalities. You might be concerned with those things, and that is fine. But God put white and black, male and female, Jew and Gentile, all into the body of Christ and crucified the whole lot. Furthermore, He has raised His Son as the life of all who live, so there is now no remaining vestige of the old. Even though Paul tells us a multitude of times that there is no such thing as Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female in Christ...we still act as though God is a respecter of persons.
4. We think God rewards us in the natural realm for "how good a Christian we are being". Business is doing well this year, I must be doing something right. My teenage daughter is pregnant, I must be doing something wrong. God is punishing me. The Law had natural blessings and curses based on conformity to the natural things demanded by that covenant. In the New Covenant, all of the blessings are ours in Christ as Christ, and all of the curses demonstrated by the Law are fulfilled in the separation and death that is life without God.
5. We think pleasing God has to do with obedience and conformity to outward commands. Pleasing God has only to do with obedience and conformity to the indwelling Christ. And that is only through the revealing of Christ unto conformity to death and walking in resurrection life.
6. We wait for things that have already come. Hello. We are in the covenant, the light, the kingdom, the relationship, the Life that they were waiting for. And we so often act just like Jews - trying to keep the commandments while we wait for Jesus to come.
7. We actually think that God is in love with a piece of geography in the middle east that served for centuries as the type and shadow of a people coming to dwell in His Son. Now His Son has come, and we actually, spiritually dwell in Him. Now we dwell in the true land of God, and know the true kingdom of David. Now we have come to cities we didn't build, crops we didn't plant, victories we didn't fight. And yet, as Christians...we have our eyes glued to CNN to see what God might be doing in the so-called Holy Land. A land he gave to the Romans in 70 AD because they did not recognize the day of their visitation.