

## What's the Message – Lesson Thirteen

Today's study introduces a new element, a visual sign of the covenant with Abraham.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Once again it is our prayer that the Lord will use this study to open your hearts and understanding so that you may more fully comprehend the grace and mercy that He has given us through Abraham. Amen.

Last time we looked deeper into God's repetition of His promise to make Abraham the father of a great nation, and how Abraham's trust in that promise was credited to him as righteousness. Then He changed their names in accordance with the new roles they would play.

Immediately following those verses comes another new element, the command of a symbolic practice that would become a major distinguishing mark of the Israelites ever since. In chapter 17 of Genesis, beginning at verse 10 we read . . .

*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you . . . So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male...shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*

What was Abraham's initial reaction? It may surprise you that this man . . . a man of faith we lauded in our last study . . . reacted with skepticism. In verse 17 we read . . . *Then Abraham fell on his face and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" "O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!"*

And what was God's reply to that? "No, . . . *but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.*"

After being so straightforwardly corrected by God, what did Abraham do then? Well, he proceeded to do exactly what God had commanded, and Abraham, Ishmael, and all the men of his house were circumcised.

As you may already know, this practice became such an important part of the religion of the Jews that in later years they looked down on non-Jews with scorn and referred to them as the un-circumcised. As we will see in later studies, some of the prophets spoke out against an attitude that had changed the role of this practice into a legalistic and distorted end in itself. Even St. Paul was criticized for reaching out to the "un-circumcised" Gentiles.

So why did God institute this practice, and what is the significance of it? Teacher, what is the message that we need to understand here?

First, we need to understand that circumcision was not an "invention" of the Jews. It was practiced by other people at different times, but for other reasons. What is different here is that God connected it to His covenant, His promise that Abraham would be a father of nations and that the world would be blessed through him. Why use this unique practice for that purpose?

When you know the history and culture of the middle-East the first thing that jumps out is that it was a patriarchal society, where the role of the male was not only dominant, but of foremost importance. So the male was chosen to send out a specific message that would apply to all.

Further, the male organ was seen as the source of life, and in some pagan religions became an idolatrous symbol in their worship. Therefore, to shed blood by cutting into this source of life became a powerful message to all who understood it. . . . It can be seen as a precursor to the shedding of blood by Jesus, our source of eternal life.

Secondly, it was a permanent mark in the flesh that would remain for a lifetime. One that would be a daily reminder to the man that he was a part of the family of Abraham, an adopted child of God who also was bound by the covenant God made with Abraham.

It was . . . as Genesis tells us . . . a visible sign in his flesh as an everlasting covenant. But it has been replaced in the New Testament church by an even more powerful visible sacrament, that of Baptism.

Next time we will learn a lesson about the God of promise . . . and justice.

This series has been developed and written by our director of teacher training, Mr. D. A. Senter, and is copyrighted by Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Flower Mound, Texas. Your narrator is Dale Gaus.

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