

# Jesus' Circumcision and Your Salvation

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Luke 2:21–24  
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

We all understand how important Christmas is. Every year, we observe it to celebrate the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. But what about Jesus' circumcision? Interestingly, both take up the same number of verses in Luke's gospel. Luke's account of Jesus' birth is twenty verses, and so is his account of Jesus' circumcision.

But we might wonder why we talk about it at all. After all, did Jesus really need to be circumcised? In the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign and seal of spiritual cleansing. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, *And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.* The problem, of course, is that Jesus didn't need spiritual cleansing because he had no personal sin. As the prophet Isaiah wrote several hundred years before he was born, *he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.* Hebrews 4:15 confirms the same. It says that *Jesus was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*

So, why was Jesus circumcised? Why did Luke take up so much space in his gospel to tell us about it? And why do we need to know about it?

## The Meaning of Circumcision

Let's begin by noting that Luke's account actually records two distinct events: our Lord's circumcision and the purification of his mother Mary. These two events were separated by thirty-three days. Leviticus 12 says, *If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled (vv. 2–4).* Thus, Jewish mothers were impure for seven days, after which they brought their sons for circumcision on the eighth day, and then they continued in their impurity for another month.

But keep in mind that this procedure applied only when women gave birth to sons. When they bore daughters, their impurity lasted twice as long — fourteen days plus sixty-six days. But why the difference? Are girls less pure than boys? No, the difference is this: boys, being circumcised in the

flesh of their foreskin, bore a part of the impurity themselves. From their earliest days, they had greater responsibility, which helped prepare them for headship within the home. But with girls, the mother bore all the impurity herself.

This shows what childbirth means in a fallen world. When a woman bears children, she produces sinners. This doesn't mean that having children is evil in itself. Of course not. God commands us to be fruitful and multiply. Rather, it reminds us of the seriousness of what we're doing when we have children. And if we want our children to be more the Lord's than ours, we have to confront them with the gospel every day. We must teach them the Word of God, pray with and for them, and set an example of piety and godliness before them.

Calvin made a helpful observation about this. He said that there's no better proof of original sin than the fact that every child comes forth polluted and every mother who gives birth needs cleansing.

Thus, circumcision cannot be separated from a mother's purification. In a sense, these two things are distinct, as we said, but they're one in meaning. They fulfill one law. Luke tells us that Mary obeyed that law. She had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day, according to verse 21, at which time she also named him according to the angel's word. She called him *Jesus* because he came not to live as a sinner but to save his people from their sins. His circumcision was part of this. Thirty-three days later, she went to the temple for purification and offered the required sacrifice. At that time, she also dedicated Jesus as her firstborn son.

## Keeping the Law

It's important to see here that Luke highlighted the laws governing childbirth in his account of Jesus' circumcision. He mentioned these laws no less than six times. Just as Joseph and Mary obeyed the law of the land and went to Bethlehem for the Roman census, so they also submitted themselves wholly to the law of God. Look how Luke spoke of this:

- *And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child (v. 21).*
- *And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished (v. 22).*
- *As it is written in the law of the Lord (v. 23).*
- *And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord (v. 24).*
- *The parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law (v. 27).*
- *And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord (v. 39).*

Because Joseph and Mary acted on behalf of Jesus, we can say that Jesus also obeyed these laws through them. We call this his passive obedience, i.e., things that were done to him or for him, but not by him. The best example of his passive obedience is his crucifixion. He didn't drive the nails into his own hands and feet; rather, he allowed others to do it to him. Yet, when we say that he was passive in these things, we don't mean that he was inactive. He actively endured them according to his Father's will.

This takes us back to where we started. Jesus didn't allow himself to be circumcised because he needed a sign of spiritual cleansing for himself. He endured it because we needed it. We needed him to cleanse us of ourselves. His circumcision assures us that he took our curse upon himself and cleansed us of every stain.

Scripture presents this idea in at least two ways. First, for those who think circumcision or any other rite of the church frees us from condemnation, Paul wrote, *For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law* (Gal. 5:3). Keeping the law shows that a person is obligated to keep the law, but nothing more. This applies to the error of baptismal regeneration as well. The only answer to our sin is Jesus Christ, as Paul wrote again, *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons* (Gal. 4:4–5).

The second way we see this in Scripture comes across in verse 23 of our text: Mary dedicated Jesus as her firstborn son. Here we have the principle of substitution. In the third chapter of Numbers, the Lord claimed the firstborn among the Hebrews for himself. Why? Because when he killed the firstborn of Egypt in the original Passover, he spared the firstborn of his people. Thus, the firstborn of Israel belonged to him in a special way. But instead of taking the firstborn from each family, he substituted the tribe of Levi in their place. But it wasn't an exact substitution — there were two hundred and seventy-three fewer Levites than firstborn sons. Others were redeemed with a five-shekel redemption price.

The Bible teaches that Jesus is one with us. Hebrews 2:11–12 says, *For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.* But it also teaches that Jesus is the firstborn. Romans 8:9 says that God predestinated us to *be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.* He paid the ransom in our place, with the result that he suffered all the curse and pain, and we received the blessings of salvation and deliverance.

## From Childhood

Here's the remarkable thing about Jesus' circumcision: we tend to focus only on his death as the payment for our sins, but he also shed his blood for us in his infancy. He made himself a debtor to the law in our place when he was just eight days old. Here again, we see the enormity of our sin — it was so great that it required our Savior to suffer for it as an infant. And he did this willingly because even at this young age, he was wholly committed to our salvation. He never wavered.

The apostle Paul mentioned Jesus' circumcision in the second chapter of his letter to the church at Colossae. He wrote, *In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead* (vv. 11–12). But what did Paul mean here? Did he mean that Jesus stripped away our sin when he was circumcised as an infant, or did he mean that Jesus put off our sins when he circumcised our hearts with the spiritual cleansing that circumcision represents?

Although it's tempting to think that *the circumcision of Christ* in these verses refers to the cutting away of his flesh, that's not what Paul meant. The first part of verse 11 makes this clear. It speaks of our circumcision — a *circumcision made without hands*, i.e., an inward circumcision done by our Savior. As one commentator wrote, "The rite of circumcision stripped off literal flesh; Christ strips off metaphorical flesh — man's sinful nature."

This interpretation is in line with how Paul spoke about circumcision elsewhere. For example, in Philippians 3:3 he wrote, *For we [New Testament believers] are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh*. Our hearts have been cleansed by the work of Christ, who empowers us to worship God as we should. And in the last two verses of Romans 2, Paul argued that outward or physical circumcision by itself doesn't help much, but inward circumcision, i.e., the circumcision of our hearts, does. He wrote, *For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God*.

Although Paul wasn't talking about Jesus' physical circumcision, we can't separate his work in our hearts from it. Why? Because, as we've already said, his circumcision on the eighth day made the circumcision of our hearts effective, just as his baptism in the Jordan gives meaning to our baptisms.

And the result is that the body of our sin has been put off. We now have the reality that circumcision once represented, viz., the forgiveness of our sins and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying grace. We no longer need the blood of bulls and goats because the blood of Jesus does everything

their blood couldn't do. And now, as his baptized people, having received the New Testament sign and seal of spiritual cleansing, we're obligated to live before him as his holy people.

The circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day was a lot more than just a ceremony or a photo op. It was God taking possession of his people through the work of his Son, just as he said to Abraham in Genesis 17: *And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee* (v. 7). Jesus' circumcision meant that he was the true seed of Abraham, the new Israel through whom God would gather all his children together.

It's true that Jesus didn't need to be circumcised as a sign of his own spiritual cleansing, but this doesn't mean that he didn't have to be circumcised for other reasons.

I've emphasized this morning that he had to be circumcised for us. His circumcision affirmed his commitment to save us from our sins. It shows that he gave himself to this objective completely, even as an infant. He suffered everything for us.

But Jesus was also circumcised for another reason. His circumcision was also a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith, as Paul called it in Romans 4:11. It showed his perfect trust in his Father as well as the perfect submission that such trust brings.

And further, Jesus' circumcision was also a sign and seal of the righteousness of *our* faith. It encourages us to live before our God with the same love and devotion that Jesus had. Why? Because we receive all the benefits of his circumcision. He did for us what we could never have done for ourselves. His blood, including that which he shed as an infant, saves us from all our sin. There's now no condemnation. Jesus saved us completely. Let's now show our thankfulness by living lives worthy of our Lord's suffering. Amen.